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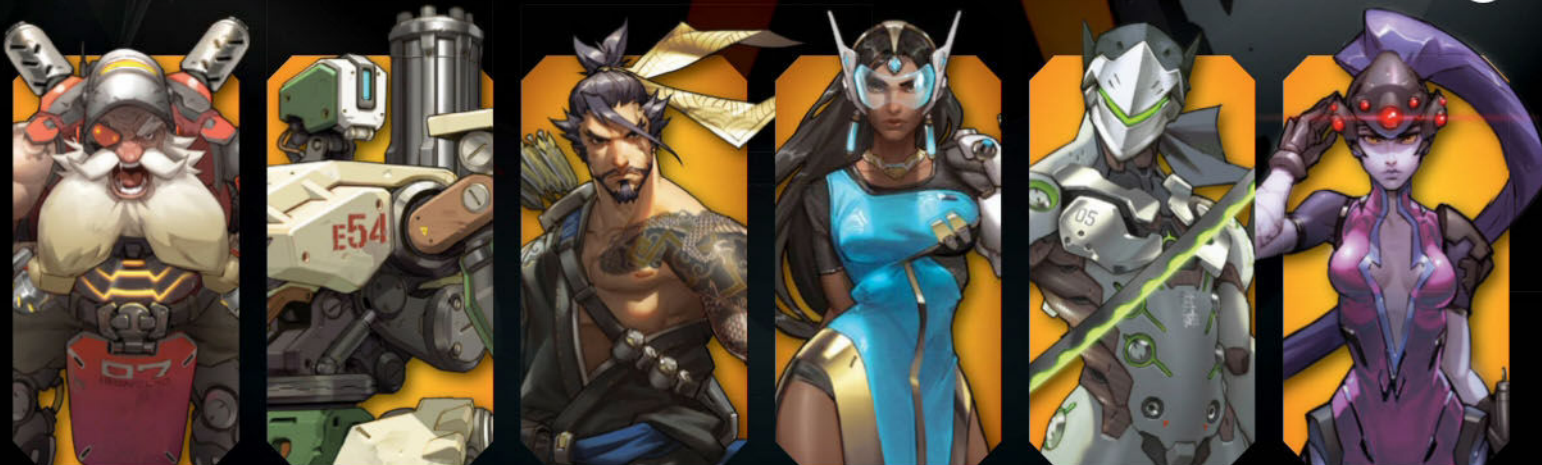
HITMAN
IS BACK

Hands-on with IO's triumphant return

BLIZZARD EXCLUSIVE!

OVERWATCH

HOW THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT CREATOR PLANS TO DOMINATE THE FPS



HIGHLIGHTS

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THE WITNESS • LEGO MARVEL'S AVENGERS • BLADE & SOUL • THAT DRAGON, CANCER
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ISSUE 171

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It's nice to see creative types break out from their comfort zones. I've always felt there was something special about a quiet, acoustic band getting loud or an aggressive electric outfit taking it down a few notches. Forcing yourself one way or the other can lead you into some really interesting places so long as you keep a kernel of your own unique voice in there too.

I see that in Blizzard's *Overwatch*. While it may be picking up some of the scraps of the defunct *Titan* project, this actually feels further outside the Irvine California group's typical output. Where *Titan* was a massive Earth-set MMO again, albeit from a first-person perspective, *Overwatch* is a purer shooter experience. This is something very different in tone and content than we've seen from this hugely successful developer.

The art style feels inspired more by manga than by Tolkien, the gameplay sharp and responsive in a way that the hacking and slashing of *WOW* and *Diablo* (as fun as they are) doesn't offer. Blizzard has dominated the MMO world, it's lead the way for loot-driven RPGs, it's kept the RTS genre alive and among it all, it has dominated the word of competitive gaming. *Overwatch* feels like a new frontier for this team, even if it's the most challenging and oversaturated market in the industry.

The thing is, if there's one developer that could take on the might of *Call Of Duty*, *Halo*, *Counter-Strike* and the rest, it's this one.

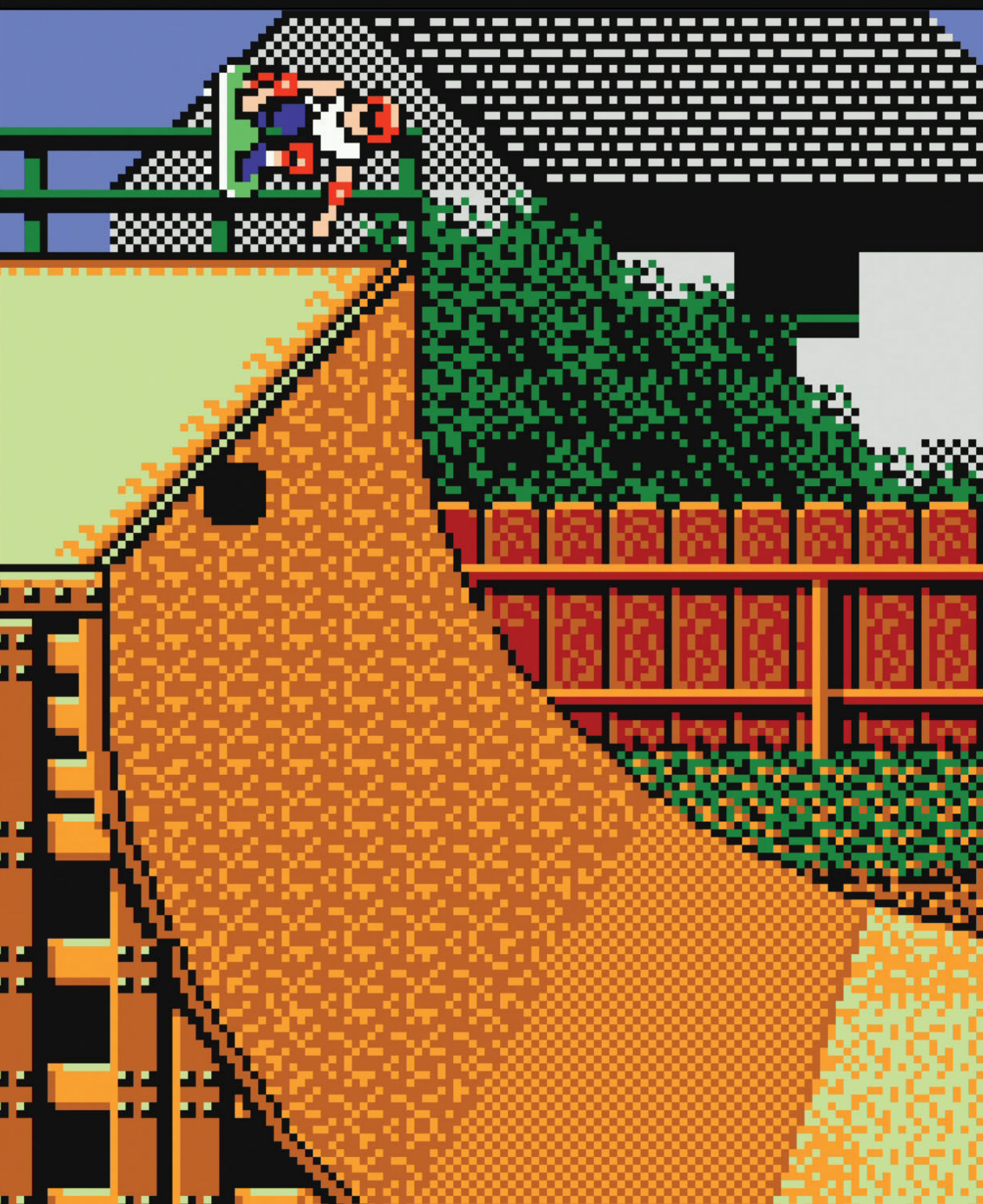
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



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SPD:4



Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 171 | 16

PREVIEWS

- 18 Hitman
- 22 Doom
- 24 Homefront: The Revolution
- 26 Horizon: Zero Dawn
- 28 Adrift
- 30 Paragon
- 32 Showcase



22
Doom

DISCUSS

08 Activision's plan to dominate eSports

With its purchase of MLG, we look closer at Activision's pro gaming plans

10 The new videogame battleground

How are the big publishers looking to cash-in on the eSports craze?

12 Kongetsu

Our man with his eyes on Japan gives us the latest intel on all things in the East

14 Room with a view

The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck offers his unique insight on the games industry

RETRO

104 The Retro Guide To Amiga

The personal computer that spawned a whole new way to experience games, we reflect on the very best it had to offer

112 Behind The Scenes: Duke Nukem 64

Neutered, trimmed, cleaned-up and simplified; how did this Nintendo-friendly Duke outing turn out to be one of his very best?

118 Retro Interview: Jon Hare

We chat with the *Sensible Soccer* creator about his proposed spiritual successor, independent development and his years making great games

122 Game Changers: Diablo

How one RPG with a simple dungeon-building system went on to define the modern world of western RPGs



112
Duke Nukem 64

FAVOURITES

16 Why I Love... Elite

Frank Arnot, StormCloud Games

80 Why I Love... Street Fighter II

Nicoll Hunt, creator of *Fist Of Awesome*, *I Fight Bears*

100 Why I Love... Rez

Andy Robinson, writer, Playtonic

142 The Vault

games™ sifts through the myriad accessories and add-ons the industry offers so you don't have to



82
Lego Marvel's Avengers

FEATURES

34 Overwatch

How is Blizzard planning to dominate the FPS the way it conquered the MMO? We speak to the team to find out

42 Three Fields Entertainment

games™ speaks exclusively to former the *Burnout* developers about their new studio and their first game, *Dangerous Golf*

48 The Division

The final verdict on Ubisoft's massive new game and its hopes to take on the might of *Destiny*

56 Is your PC VR ready?

Your essential guide to the PC tech you need to get your PC ready for Oculus Rift

62 20 years of Pokémon

We look at the reasons why Game Freak's simple action-RPG has seen off all challengers for the last two decades

REVIEWS

74 XCOM 2

78 Street Fighter V

80 The Witness

82 Lego Marvel's Avengers

84 Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon

86 Final Fantasy Explorers

87 Undertale

88 Darkest Dungeon

90 Blade & Soul

92 Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India

93 Arslan: The Warriors Of Legend

94 Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo

96 The Banner Saga

97 Resident Evil Zero HD

98 That Dragon, Cancer



80
The Witness



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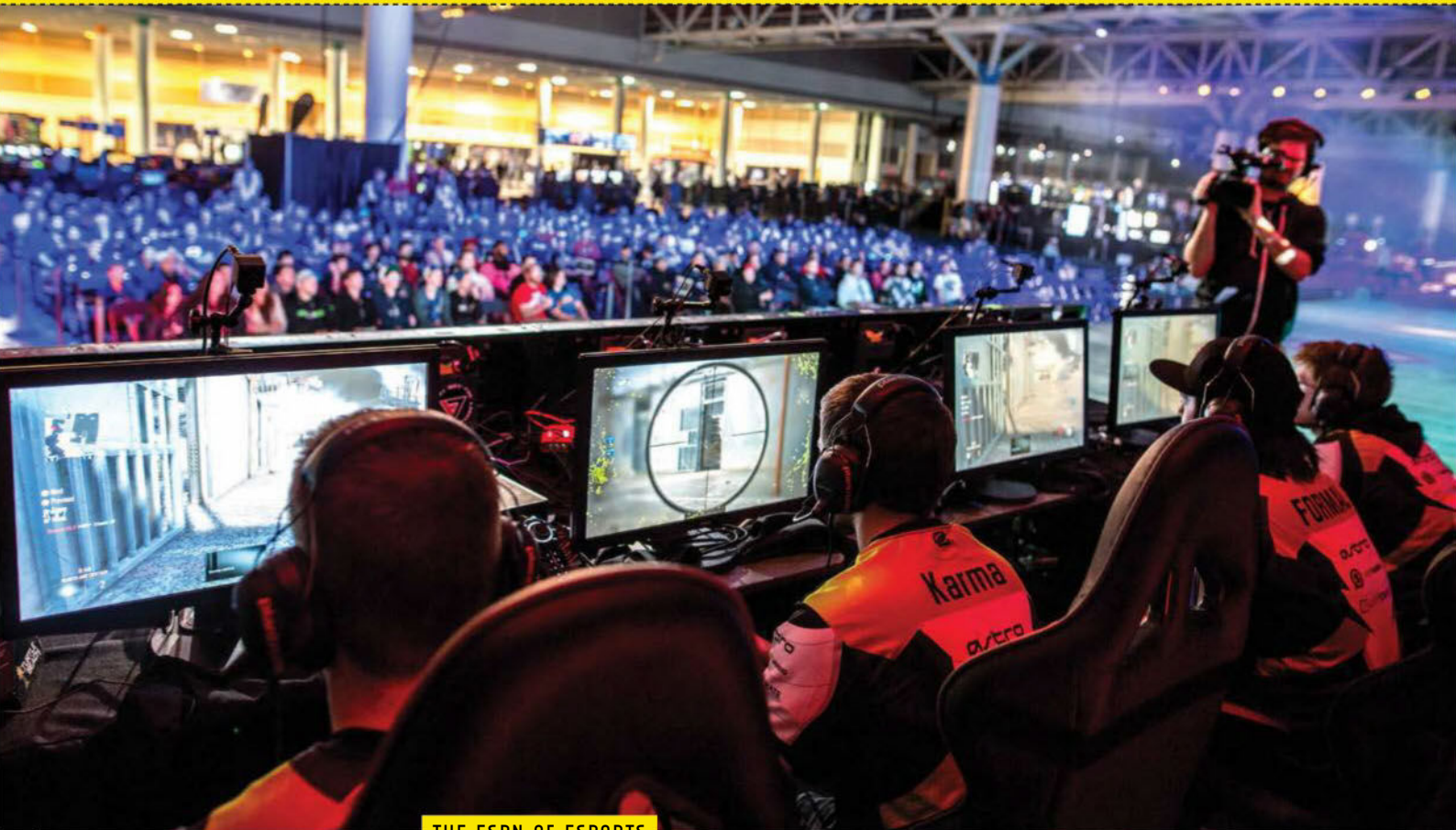
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Turn to page 70

34 Feature

OVERWATCH

Blizzard's plan to dominate the FPS landscape revealed



THE ESPN OF ESPORTS

Is Activision Blizzard trying to buy its way into eSports?

→ **games™** explores the move to take pro gaming out of the hands of the players, as Activision Blizzard makes a big play for control of eSports broadcasting.

A

ctivision Blizzard isn't just betting hard on the growth of eSports, it's making an aggressive play to own it.

Following hotly on the heels of the formation of a dedicated internal competitive gaming division in October 2015, the *Call Of Duty* and *StarCraft II* publisher has now completed the purchase of Major League Gaming (MLG) in a deal estimated to be worth 46 million dollars.

Bobby Kotick, the chief executive officer of Activision Blizzard, has already outlined his ambition to "create the ESPN of eSports," and the acquisition of MLG is certainly the first step on that long and difficult road.

"MLG's ability to create premium content, its proven broadcast technology platform – including its live streaming capabilities – strengthens our strategic position in competitive gaming," continues Kotick in a

Below. Huge events such as the *League Of Legends* Worlds, which **games™** recently attended at Wembley Arena, show the growing pull of eSports.



statement. "MLG has an incredibly strong and seasoned team and a thriving community. Together, we will create new ways to celebrate players and their unique skills, dedication and commitment to gaming."

When it comes to 'strengthening your strategic position', it doesn't get much better than bringing MLG into the fold. Activision Blizzard estimates that eSports already attracts over 100 million unique viewers annually through MLG alone, and that's a number that the publisher believes is "bigger than audiences for many professional sports leagues." There's some truth to the claim; in 2014 the *League Of Legends* Championship brought in more viewers than both the NBA Finals and baseball's World Series. Watching skilled young adults owning their respective videogames on the global stage is fast becoming one of the world's biggest spectator sports – and this in spite of networks doing their best to distance themselves from the grassroots success story.

Your guide to the essential stories

10 THE GAMES TO DOMINATE ESPORTS

What new titles are looking the most likely to set the world on fire in the pro gaming scene?

12 KONGETSU

Our Japanese gaming expert turns his eye East once again to tell us about the trends we should be watching out for too

14 ROOM WITH A VIEW

Are we demanding enough from the games we consider the best of the year? Dan Pinchbeck asks the tough questions

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Inset Following the purchase of MLG, expect to see the likes of *Call Of Duty* and *StarCraft* to receive an even bigger presence in eSports programming and the publisher looks to bring eSports into the mainstream.

We get the feeling that ESPN president John Skipper will come to regret so fervently claiming that eSports was "not a sport", as he famously barked in solidarity with his pundits as they kicked up a fuss following ESPN2's airing of a *Heroes Of The Storm* tournament in April 2015. With Activision Blizzard estimating that "eSports is projected to have over 300 million viewers" by 2017, and that \$46m investment doesn't seem that outlandish – it's also none to surprising to see ESPN now attempting to launch its own eSports channel at the turn of the year. Blizzard Activision cites "significant opportunities in ticket sales, advertising, sponsorships, licensing and merchandising" for the sector, and ESPN will likely regret not getting in on the ground floor when it had the chance. The likes of *League Of Legends* and *DOTA 2* are already attracting huge audiences to their live events, easily selling out large sports stadiums; most recently witnessed in the UK as 12,000 spectators piled into the Wembley SSE Arena to watch *League Of Legend* pros compete for a \$1 million dollar prize pool in the annual Riot run championships. Clearly, Activision will now be looking to elevate some of its key titles to pull the same feverish crowds.

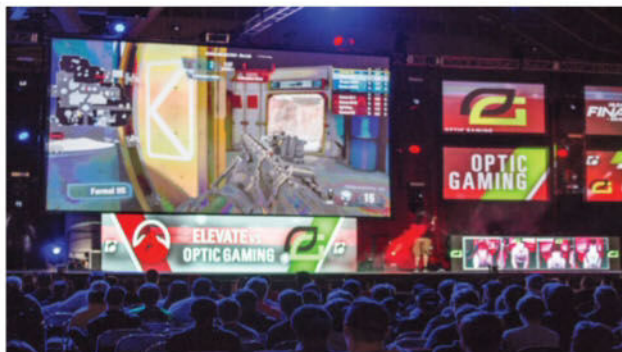
“This acquisition and Activision Blizzard’s commitment to competitive gaming will expand the opportunities for gamers to be recognised and celebrated for their competitive excellence”

Below The crowds for pro gaming events are impressive, but viewing figures online are likely the key to interest from publishers like Activision and EA.

In many ways, this acquisition seems like a natural step for Activision Blizzard. The publisher has taken a growing interest in professional gaming over the last ten years. Its determination to establish *StarCraft* as the premier competitive strategy title has been instrumental in establishing the foundations of the pro scene and, hell, playing the game

has effectively become a national sport in South Korea. *Call Of Duty* and *Hearthstone* now too attract huge audiences with their respective annual championships and huge prize pools.

Looking back to October 2015, you can see the roots of this MLG deal beginning to break ground. The company didn't just establish a



Above In less than two years, the *Call Of Duty* Championships have escalated from quite humble affairs to monstrous showcases of FPS talent from around the world.

GAMES SET TO STORM ESPORTS

→ The pro gaming elite is always looking for a new challenge, so here are the top contenders

■ THE RATE OF growth for the eSports industry is accelerating. Its market value is expected to approach \$2 billion by 2018 – that's simply unprecedented territory. The most popular competitive titles, such as *League Of Legends* and *Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, already attract millions of players (and even more viewers) each month, and offer impressive prize pools to attract professional talent and coaches into the fold. With 2016 already proving to be a big year for eSports – thanks to the early buzz surrounding the *Halo* World Championships and Activision Blizzard acquisition of MLG – there's an even greater desire for advertisers, broadcasters and streaming sites to get involved with the action. Developers too are pumping more resources than ever into supporting eSports, and as such there's plenty of new opportunities for amateur players to try and wrestle their way onto the scene. These four titles are the ones we think are really going to go big in 2016.



HALO 5: GUARDIANS

■ Microsoft's flagship shooter is about to make a real impact on the competitive scene. The *Halo* World Championship is now offering a life-changing amount of money to the victors – the prize pool is already at \$2 million, and growing – which means *Halo* is about to solidify itself as one of the top eSports shooters out there.



OVERWATCH

■ *Overwatch* is due to launch later this spring and it's already generating quite a bit of buzz in the eSports scene. A fast and frantic shooter, it'll be a change of pace to the most considered FPS games like *Halo* and *Counter Strike* – so long as Blizzard can sort out the ranked mode and progression systems before launch that is.



HEROES OF THE STORM

■ *Heroes Of The Storm* has had a bit of a slow pick up by *MOBA* players, but we expect 2016 to be the year it really takes off; especially as Blizzard just announced a \$1.5 million Global Championship Circuit and the highly anticipated Arena mode. *Heroes* is starting to gain momentum and it's only going to get bigger in 2016.



CALL OF DUTY

■ We already knew *Call Of Duty* would have a \$3 million prize pool this year for the *Call Of Duty* Championships – as well as a Professional and a Challenge Divisions for pros and amateurs alike – but it's only going to grow in stature with the full weight of MLG behind it. Keep an eye on *COD* in 2016, it's going to get *even bigger*.

new eSports focused division; it also brought in MLG co-founder Mike Sepso and former ESPN CEO Steve Bornstein to run it. Fast forward two months and Activision Blizzard now has a viable platform to "build on the company's competitive gaming leadership by creating all-new ways to deliver the best-in-class fan experience across games, platforms and geographies, furthering the development of its world-leading eSports ecosystem."

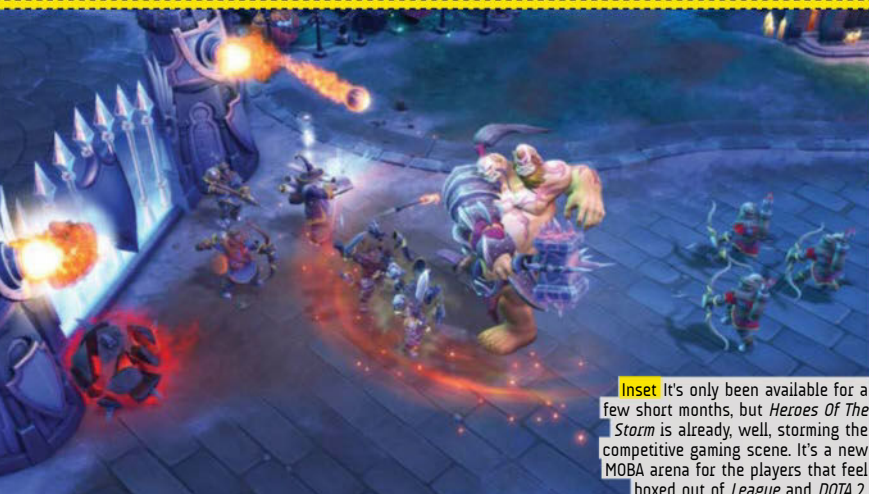
"Last year, Activision Blizzard created entertainment that was viewed and played by over 150 million people for more than 13 billion hours," Bornstein said at the time in a statement. "I believe eSports will rival the biggest traditional sports leagues in terms of future opportunities and between advertising, ticket sales, licensing, sponsorships and merchandising, there are tremendous growth areas for this nascent industry. I'm excited to help Activision Blizzard further its leadership position in eSports."

Let us translate the corporate speak for you, it reads: with games such as *StarCraft II*, *Heroes Of the Storm*, *Hearthstone* and *Call Of Duty* already generating huge profits and attention on the competitive scene – and with *Overwatch* on the near horizon expected to do the same – Activision is preparing to take full control over the ways its games are marketed, merchandised, and, perhaps most importantly, played by the populous. That's a major concern moving forward; whether eSports will thrive with such a large publisher controlling every aspect of its very being – there's always been an aspect of competitive gaming that's felt fresh and free, driven by the hunger of pro players to prove that they are the very best on the planet without the interference or support from publishers.

There's a chance that this will only bother the aging gamers, but the thought of being flooded with adverts and merchandising opportunities in the middle of a tense final does rub us the wrong way. Still, eSports is a big business endeavour, with millions tuning into live streams through the likes of Twitch,

Inset Cementing its place as the leading eSports title, the *League Of Legends* European championship was played to a packed out and insanely wild Wembley Arena.





Inset It's only been available for a few short months, but *Heroes Of The Storm* is already, well, storming the competitive gaming scene. It's a new MOBA arena for the players that feel boxed out of *League* and *DOTA 2*.



Inset Microsoft is putting a lot of weight behind *Halo 5: Guardians* in the competitive scene, with the upcoming *Halo World Championships* likely to establish it as the must play FPS for players that want to make a living off shooting digital guys.



Inset Developer Epic is the latest big studio to look at the *MOBA* more closely and will be hoping to make an impact on eSports.



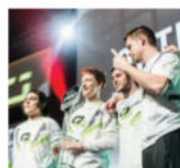
“Last year, Activision Blizzard created entertainment that was viewed and played by over 150 million people for more than 13 billion hours”

Xbox Live, YouTube Gaming and commercial television channels. That commercialisation, as Mike Sepso explains, is only going to become more obvious and important to the growth of eSports in the years ahead though. “The acquisition of MLG’s business is an important step towards Activision Blizzard Media Networks’ broader mission to bring eSports into the mainstream by creating and broadcasting premium eSports content, organising global league play and expanding distribution with key gaming partners.”

“Our mission for over 12 years has been to promote and expand the growth of competitive gaming worldwide and today the industry is at a key inflection point as its popularity soars and rivals that of many traditional professional sports,” adds MLG’s CEO Sundance DiGiovanni. “This acquisition and Activision Blizzard’s commitment to competitive gaming will expand the opportunities for gamers to be recognised and celebrated for their competitive excellence.” The reality of the situation is that it was only going to be so long before some publisher made a play for MLG or one of its rivals.

This acquisition represents a desire for corporate game makers to oversee all aspects of the tournament process – which could filter down to team, rule and game mode selection. Riot Games has found great success taking complete control over its events with sector leader *League Of Legends*, so whose to say whether the same model can’t be replicated across a broader network encompassing more titles and a focus on mainstream media. If Activision didn’t do it then EA might have; the creator of *FIFA* and *Battlefield* announced its own eSports division in December with veteran Peter Moore at the helm. Whether EA will want to let its games be played and advertised on a network controlled and owned by its biggest rival remains to be seen – though it would be difficult for EA to launch a competitive business venture now, MLG is one of the most recognised and celebrated competitive gaming hangouts in the world and it’s just received a huge cash and profile boost.

With production costs rising considerably since the arrival of the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, publishers are now looking



Above There are already more tournaments and trophies out there than we can count. Could these moves break up the pro gaming scene even more than it is currently?



Above With more competition on the horizon, *League Of Legends* is preparing for some massive changes in the coming year.

for emerging new revenue opportunities. Activision Blizzard will now be betting big on eSports being that revenue stream; desperately hoping it can take a spectator sport that is still widely misunderstood by the mainstream – not to mention considered a niche by aging and hastily irrelevant traditional sport broadcast networks – and make good on its multi-million dollar investment. As gamers increasingly reject current monetisation methods such as in-app purchases and season passes, new ideas are needed to cover the production costs of increasingly bloated triple-A titles. Activision Blizzard doesn’t just need MLG to become the gaming equivalent of ESPN, it also needs it to attract the same lucrative big-brand and budget advertisers that has eluded eSports thus far. Is it possible? It seems unlikely, but if anyone could it would be a company like Activision. And let’s not forget, if you’d have asked us five years ago whether you could earn a million dollars for headshot no-scoping somebody in *Call Of Duty*, we’d have laughed you out of a room... And look at where we are now.



KONGETSU

Game Over For Retro?

Thank you. But
our Princess is
in another
castle!.. Just
kidding! Ha ha
ha! Bye bye.



“Japanese copies of less language-sensitive games like platformers have long been popular among international collectors”

Classics apparently running dry in Akihabara

One of my enduring memories of my last trip to Japan was weaving around back alleys and clambering up confusing stairwells in search of some gaming classics, and the wall-to-wall technicolour patchworks of all kinds of discs, cards and boxes that lined the walls when we did eventually find what we were looking for left me wide-eyed, giddy with choice, and clinging to my wallet for dear life. How saddening it is, then, to see pictures circulating online of some of those same store shelves now looking more like Black Friday aftermath than the beautiful gaming history lesson I saw just a few short years ago.

Naturally, supplies of old, out-of-print games are always going to be finite and we're getting to a point where the games we grew up with – the SNES classics, the cult PSone hits or the hidden N64 gems – are getting harder and harder to find. Hardcore collectors have had years to secure copies for their libraries (often in duplicate or even triplicate, in the cases of the most devoted hoarders), slowly shrinking the pool of available copies that will bounce between more casual players as they enjoy them before selling them on again and doing horrible things to the price – Japanese copies of less language-sensitive games like platformers have long been popular among international collectors as the cheapest options (especially true of older stuff from the 50Hz dark days of PAL gaming) and it looks like this is finally starting to take its toll.

Saddening as the state of play appears to be, though, it's not all doom and gloom. Some of Akihabara's most popular and well-known stores appear to have had something of a stock crisis, sure, but the games are usually still out there... if you know where to look. Many smaller or more remote stores are doing their bit to keep gaming's great heritage alive and in the view of a new generation of players plus, like so many other forms of business, this is likely just a striking side effect of the retro games market belying its simple roots and heading online – carts and discs that might once have been taken into stores like Super Potato are now simply found on auction sites or message boards, although the spiralling prices still suggest that there's also a broader issue at hand for would-be collectors.

Between stock being bought up and packaging perishing (curse those beautiful cardboard boxes!) in the years since their launch, it's only going to get harder – and more expensive – to make a serious go of a retro gaming collection. I just hope that the online market and swelling prices don't prevent others from experiencing that same sheer delight I felt upon finding a treasure trove of classics in the least likely of dead ends.



Luke Albigés is Editor of Play magazine and, in hindsight, should have bought that copy of Suzuki Bakuhatu when he had the chance...

Import Watch

→ Ikenie to Yuki no Setsuna

■ A brand new RPG from Square Enix is always going to pique our interest, and this latest release courtesy of the oddly-named Tokyo RPG Factory is no exception. Announced at E3 with little more than a teaser trailer, its launch has crept up on us somewhat and it's finally out in Japan. Said to be a love letter to classic 16-bit RPGs like *Chrono Trigger* and earlier *Final Fantasy* titles, it seems like something that could fill the hole left by every major player in the genre clambering over each other to reinvent the JRPG for a whole new audience.



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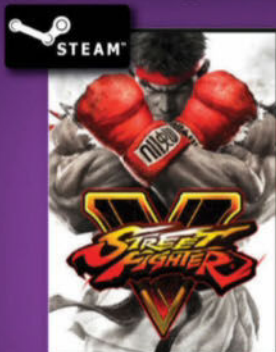
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ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck

“Does a game with offensive characterisation, world building, plot writing, story, etc, deserve to be called a great game?”

It's oh so quiet, it's oh so still...

0 ur next game features a man called Loud who uses his penis as a periscope and must keep it dangling outside his trousers at all times or go blind. That's basically a bit of narrative design from a man we pedestal as a giant and auteur in the industry, from one of the best games of last year. Okay, I flipped the gender, but that's about it. Which should make us all just a little bit embarrassed, really.

The Phantom Pain is a great open-world stealth shooter, it really is. The mechanics are gorgeously balanced, it's expansive yet detailed, it's a real GOTY contender – provided you overlook a few things. The first hour is rough, up until you hit Afghanistan: mainly cutscenes that are, let's be fair, pretty badly written; some odd design that boxes the player into unintuitive spaces; mechanic balancing that doesn't do justice to the rest of the game. But I want to talk about Quiet, because this caused a minor flurry of upset amongst game critics and journalists as another instance of misogyny that has no place in the modern world.

Here's a thought experiment: let's switch out the sexism for racism. Let's transform Quiet (or that quite extraordinary opening shot down the front of a nurse's dress, just before she gets strangled by another woman who then gets set on fire) into a non-white character – I'm sure you can come up with a racist stereotype to drop in there. And what if the villain was, say, a hook-nosed Jewish banker who eats babies, in the spirit of old Nazi propaganda? Hell, what if NPCs just shouted out racial slurs occasionally? Still a game of the year contender?

This is serious stuff, even if it's unpalatable or difficult. The whole 'Yeah, but it's a game' crap that we're still drowning in – unbelievable, given it's 2016 – boils down to this question: does content matter? Admittedly, there are no absolutes. There has to be scope for satire and pushing acceptability in any media; the alternative is censorship and no-one wants that. But does a game with offensive characterisation, world building, plot writing, story, etc, deserve to be called a great game? I would say this is a really tough question, but it's not actually that tough if we're honest about it. There might not be an easy answer, but for most people, the lines are pretty clear. And we have to not just stand up for what we believe in, but be prepared to have the courage of our convictions. You cannot claim to give a damn about sexism in games and call *The Phantom Pain* game of year, it's just hypocritical. It's like H.P. Lovecraft's racism: an ugly mark that takes the shine off what are otherwise extraordinary works.

My question is this: if you want to claim that content matters, or that misogyny in games is unacceptable, then can you really be putting a game that is clearly, openly sexist on your GOTY list? If you do, then what does that tell the world about our industry? It's not just that we have serious issues with openly violent misogyny amongst parts of the gaming community, but that we have a far bigger issue – institutionalised misogyny amongst the people who claim to be dedicated to standing up to sexism and bigotry. And that's more than embarrassing, that should be properly worrying.

Games such as *The Witcher III* have been praised for their balanced and thoughtful take on their characters, often challenging difficult ideas and issues.



Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room. His views aren't necessarily representative of games™



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Sentry

FIRE_[8X]

Sentry

FIRE_[1X]

Earth[Giga]

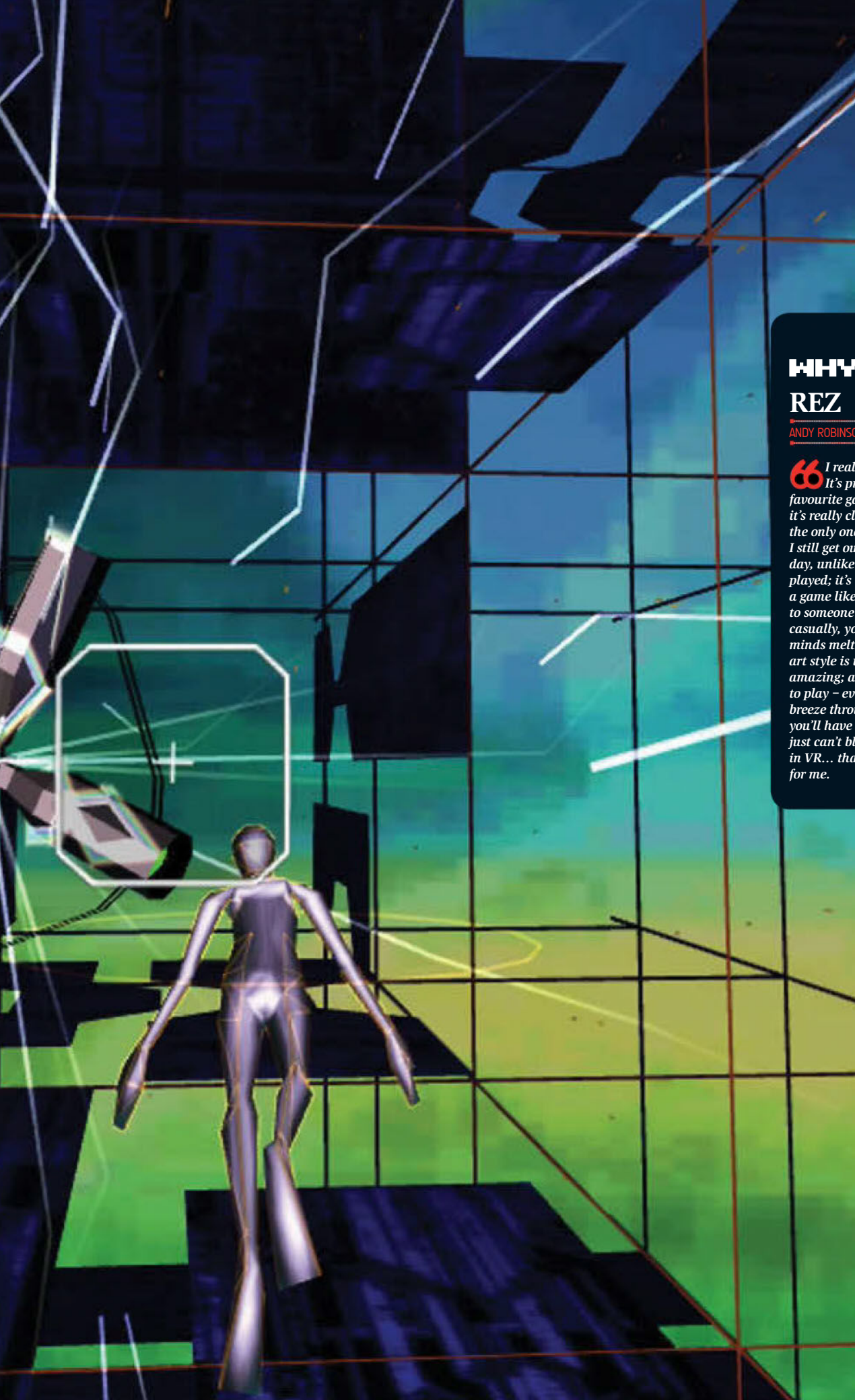
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“If you showed it to
someone that plays
games casually, you
will still see their
minds melting in
front of it”

ANDY ROBINSON, WRITER, PLAYATONIC





WHY I



REZ

ANDY ROBINSON, WRITER, PLAYTonic

“I really, really love Rez. It's probably not my favourite game of all time, but it's really close. It's certainly the only one that after 15 years, I still get out. It's still, to this day, unlike anything else I've played; it's very difficult to find a game like it. If you showed it to someone that plays games casually, you will still see their minds melting in front of it. The art style is timeless; it still looks amazing; and it's still amazing to play – even though you can breeze through it in 40 minutes, you'll have an amazing time. I just can't bloody wait to play it in VR... that's sold VR for me. **”**



ROUND THE WORLD TRIP

IO INTERACTIVE IS promising to release one new location per month up until that time when *Hitman*'s 'season one' comes to an end later in 2016. After Paris hits as part of the Intro Pack in March, it'll be Italy, Morocco, Thailand, USA and Japan within which to test our skills at dealing clandestine death.

Clearly, some effort has been made to create a diverse range of locations to explore, interact with and master. Successful fulfilment of this will be essential in *Hitman*'s ability to capture an audience and convince us that the episodic structure is one worth the wait each month. Each and every game tends to live and die by the quality of its content, and this bite size release approach makes that reality even more stark given that many players are likely to exhaust each month's offering in anticipation of the next. If it's not exhaustive enough, complaints are going to be commonplace.

Hitman

CONCEPT ■ Use your environment, its inhabitants, its items and, most importantly, your own creative thinking to assassinate specific targets as silently as possible

Can a drastic change in tactics revive an ageing assassin?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Denmark
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Io Interactive
Release: 11 March 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 1998 in Copenhagen, Io Interactive is most famous for its *Hitman* series. Their first release came in 2000, in the form of *Hitman: Codename 47*, and up until 2012 the studio managed to release at least one game every two years. With four years passed since *Hitman Absolution*, expectations are understandably high.

Developer History

Hitman Absolution 2012 [Multi]
Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days 2010 [Multi]
Mini Ninjas 2009 [Multi]
Kane & Lynch 2007 [Multi]
Hitman: Blood Money 2006 [Multi]
Hitman: Codename 47 2000 [PC]

High Point

Hitman: Blood Money is still, rightly, considered one of the most impressive and revolutionary games of the past decade. When other games were focused on set-pieces and rigid spectacle, *Blood Money* provided openness and encouraged creative thinking.

Developer Io Interactive is all too aware of the fact that not everybody takes kindly to change. Upon the release of *Hitman Absolution* in 2012, the general consensus revolved around the game being too structured and rigid; too far removed from the themes of expansive action and personal interpretation that had propelled previous games in the *Hitman* series to such critical and commercial highs.

This firsthand experience of the suspicions that accompany alterations to familiar structures, however, hasn't muted Io Interactive's intent when it comes to evolution and, perhaps in this instance, revolution.

Episodic releases are a common part of the contemporary videogame landscape, and have been for a number of years. No one with any exposure to the industry and its offerings would raise an eyebrow at the announcement that an upcoming release is opting for such a format. Releasing one episode a month, or sometimes even less frequently, until the 'full' game is upon us is just one square in an increasing complex patchwork of release options that now includes early access, free-to-play, subscription services and microtransaction-based 'freemium' titles.

The space of mainstream, triple-A games has, though, predominantly avoided taking the dive into these new realms of consumption. This should come as little surprise

given the fact that mainstream audiences tend to be the last demographic to understand and accept any deviations an industry might make away from the status quo. Io Interactive has decided that it's time for that to change and it is taken upon itself to make it happen.

Hitman is now embracing the episodic release format, its Danish developer taking the role of trailblazer in what is surely going to become a more common route for mainstream franchises in future. Starting in March, one new location per month is promised; each of them

hosting their own self-contained narrative, as well as playing into the bigger picture of what is being dubbed 'season one', which is due to end later in 2016.

Following the awkward reception awarded *Absolution*, this drastic change of approach is undoubtedly a risk. Fail here and it's entirely likely that the series' audience is going to lose all faith in its current credentials and future potential. The risk is made even greater given the fact that the episodic release schedule was only announced in January, a mere two months prior to the date those that had already locked in their pre-orders expected to be able to delve into a fuller experience.

However, long-term fans have much to feel hopeful about. Io has taken on board the fan response to *Absolution*, reacting by realigning *Hitman*, and its enigmatic protagonist Agent 47, with those ideologies that worked to grant the series such an overwhelming initial success. While one location per month might not sound like much on paper, once you've engaged with an example of what Io's interpretation of a 'location' is, it's easy to give the new structure your backing.

Presently, we've played what is known as the 'Intro Pack' - the slate of content available

"We decided to take the full leap and publish Hitman as a truly episodic game experience"

HANNES SEIFERT IO INTERACTIVE

on 11 March and the bedrock for what's to come thereafter. Once you've gotten past a lengthy tutorial and a prologue that hints at a narrative that pivots around a secretive agency with influence throughout the world of politics, power and finances, it's on to the centrepiece that is a Parisian mansion.

It's impossible to undersell the scope and complexity of this construction, a myriad of systems and possibilities combining to form what ranks as one of the most ambitious self-contained sites ever devised for a videogame.

What's striking is the scale, although not in a manner that we'd typically define it. The mansion doesn't stand up to the kinds of boorish and misleading claims made by other games that boast hundreds of square miles of space for 'players to explore and run wild', but it does provide endless means of achieving your murderous objectives.

Your goal within the mansion is to assassinate two individuals, using an elaborate and well-attended fashion show being held at the venue as cover for your presence. Moral objections to killing the two are quickly resolved when you learn a little more about their questionable backgrounds and soak up the turgid atmosphere of ill-gotten wealth that plasters itself across every wall and floor of a building too theatrical to be thought tasteful.

How you go about offing them is down to you, although very different angles of approach are required to take both of them down without attracting the attentions of bodyguards and well-armed private security. One of your marks prefers to wander the lower floors, directing the fashion show and making sure guests are well-fed and pandered to. The challenge here is to end their life without being noticed, meaning some form of distraction and/or long-distance kill is desirable.

It seems like a shame to reveal too many of the methods available to you when it comes to making the hit, so we're not going to do so. In a game that's all about experimentation, thought

and observation, the last thing you want is to know how to get the job done. Rest assured, though, that there are few limits when it comes to achieving your task. It would be wrong and irresponsible to describe *Hitman* as a 'sandbox' game given how staunchly it relies on specific mechanics to operate, but there are so many of these systems at play that it's entirely possible to execute on almost anything that you can think of.

The second target is easier to dispatch due to their preference of staying higher up among the exclusive VIP floors that are naturally devoid of passersby, but getting up there isn't easy. Sometimes, then, the greatest hurdle presented to you isn't the pulling of the trigger, it's working out how to get a clear shot. Not that you want to rely on crude firearms, of course, but you get the idea...

Really, though, the star turn here is not the kills or Agent 47 (who, in fact, is so thinly drawn that he'd become invisible if you turned him sideways), it's the crowd. Io has managed to pack in 300 AI beings into the mansion's grounds, each with their own digital lives,

PERMADEATH

IN A NOD towards the increasingly popular idea of 'timed content', *Hitman* gives you the option of assassinating what Io is calling Elusive Targets. The concept here is that, for a limited number of hours, a specific individual will be singled out for death and you have just one chance to end their life. If you succeed, they're dead forever. If you don't, your failure will remain on your record forever.

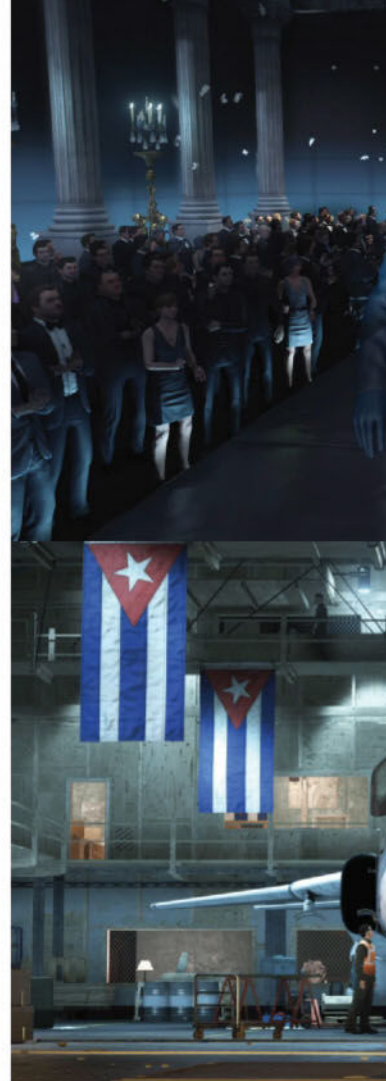
The promise is that these targets will be incredibly difficult to identify, let alone kill. Before starting you'll be briefed on their history, but it's up to you to find them within the level by observing the actions of others and overlapping that with the backstory you've been given. So, while new locations will be released just once a month, new challenges will arise regularly.

"This isn't a sports game, it's not designed to cater to everybody in the world, but some people really, really like it"

HANS SEIFERT IO INTERACTIVE

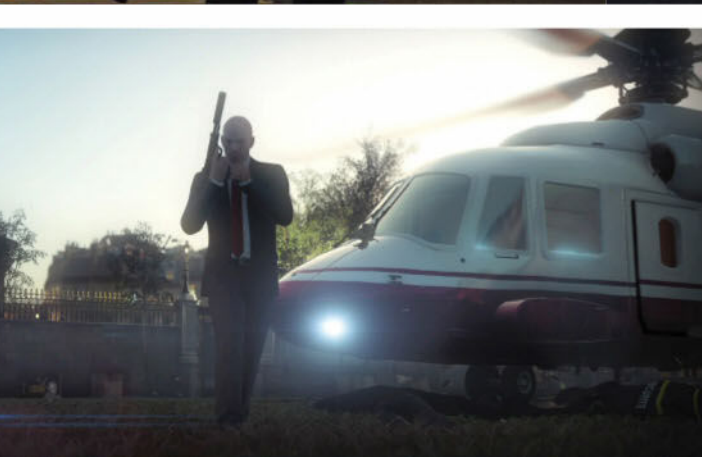
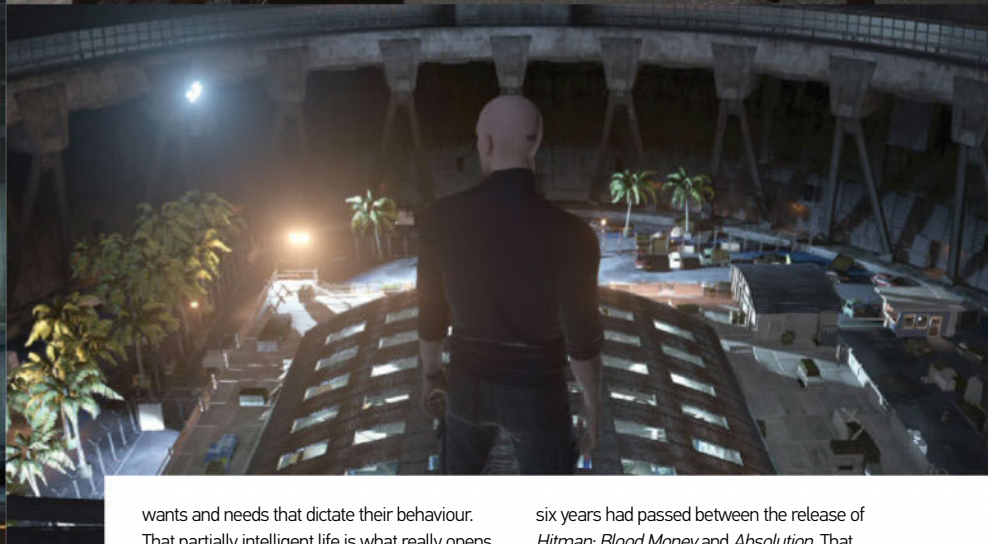


■ Above: The classic *Hitman* gameplay cycle of sneaking, assessing and gradually executing your plan to take out a target remains as compelling and complex as ever. The episodic structure to the game may mean you spend more time repeating missions while waiting for the next instalment, but that's not necessarily such a bad thing. Testing out new approaches has always been an enjoyable element to this series.



■ Above: The missions revealed so far show a good mix of locations and potential challenges. Your tactics for taking out a target at a Paris fashion show are unlikely to be the same as they would be for infiltrating a military base or air hangar like this one above. Right: New weapons will be made available to you after each successful pass of a mission, which gives you another incentive to keep replaying the game. Not something most episodic titles can boast. Below: As you can see the episodic release has done no harm to the graphical quality Io has aimed for with *Hitman*.





wants and needs that dictate their behaviour. That partially intelligent life is what really opens up the door of possibility to the creative and observant player.

Waiters, bodyguards, chefs, gardeners, fashion show attendees and all many of other individuals, therefore, have their own idea of the immediate and wider situation. A waiter's need might be to keep guests happy and fed, which you can take advantage of if you're prepared to think things through. One attendee might simply be there to observe the models on the catwalk, while another might have an agenda just as subversive as your own. Only through surveying the scene can you highlight these outlooks and use them to your advantage.

The result is an environment that quite literally feels like it's alive around you. So many games rely on you to provide some sort of impetus to force them into life, but that isn't the case here. While there is a disconnect between the 300 AI entities and the 'standard' digital mannequins that are absent from any comparative sense of life, the area is full of enough of these more sophisticated examples as to make it feel dense with potential. As an aside, the 300 number isn't arbitrary. It's a technical limitation based on the capacity of today's hardware, we're told.

Those adaptations and results that can be derived from such a complex matrix of individuals is in keeping with the reasons for the episodic release structure. Io might have a steady stream of releases under its belt, but

six years had passed between the release of *Hitman: Blood Money* and *Absolution*. That, says the studio, was far too long to allow it to intelligently react to fan feedback. Six years, after all, is an incredibly long time in the fast-moving, technology-driven world of mainstream videogames. What worked in 2010 is not likely to work now.

Releasing one part of the bigger picture each month allows the design team to gauge fan feedback and react to it as they put the finishing touches to new content releases. The plan, then, is not just to add more locations, but to constantly refine and perfect the underlying structure that makes locations such as the Parisian mansion tick. It's a grand plan, especially considering *Hitman's* traditional place within the typically conservative triple-A place. But if things go as designed then Io will have first-mover advantage and key experience when it comes to re-defining how the masses might consume interactive content.

Surely, other publishers will be keeping their eyes and ears trained on how well the experiment works and how engaged the audience remains over the long term. Combine that desire to break new ground with the quality on show within the Paris location and it's difficult not to want it to succeed. Triple-A games have long since had their creative heyday, with the indie scene having completely taken over the role of pioneer, so it's about time someone tried something new. This could be the killer move it needs.



"It's not about canned set pieces, cinematic sequences. The roller coaster is about the action and the combat and it's a blast"

MARTIN STRATTON, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, ID SOFTWARE

Doom

CONCEPT ■ The corridor shooter that drew first blood back in the Nineties returns to spill buckets of the stuff in a brand new generation

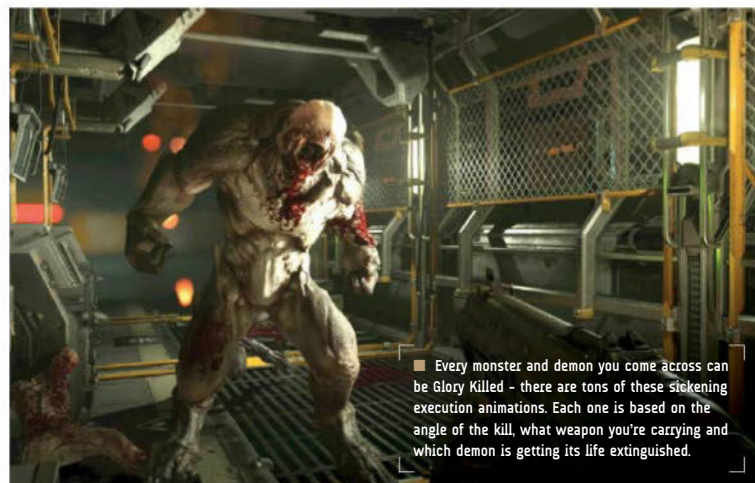
A reinvigorated veteran heads into the belly of the beast

Doom is getting ready to blow the face off the genre it helped popularise, with nothing less than an explosive shotgun. It's been 11 long years since *Doom* last graced our screens, and in its absence the humble shooter has transformed into a sugar-coated darling more concerned with scripted, cinematic set-pieces than super-fast shootouts. Well, *Doom* is spooling up to make its long-awaited return and if a slew of recent details are anything to go by, it's one for the purists.

A reboot it may be, but *Doom* is coming off more like a refresh for the shooter genre in general, with a staunch back-to-basics approach to the gameplay. Want to reload

your weapon? Sorry, you better collect some of the blue-tinted ammo packets that spewed out of that demon you just eviscerated. Want to take things at a gentler pace? Maybe settle down in some cover and snipe yourself some headshots? Think again, kid.

The rip-roaring *Doom* of 2016 has no mercy for those in need of a breather - this is an FPS for the fleet of foot, one that's got your default speed locked at sprint and a quick death waiting for those that hang around too long. Both multiplayer mode and the single-player campaign feel refreshingly hyperactive, and the introduction of Demon Tokens (which transform players into rampaging demons for



■ Every monster and demon you come across can be Glory Killed - there are tons of these sickening execution animations. Each one is based on the angle of the kill, what weapon you're carrying and which demon is getting its life extinguished.



■ Above: SnapMap joins *Doom* to bring mods (or at least, some form of them) to consoles as well as PCs.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC, Xbox One

Origin: USA

Publisher: Bethesda Softworks

Developer: id Software

Release: 13 May 2016

Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

Veteran studio id Software began developing the original *Doom* back in 1992 and remains one of the industry's most enduring elder entities. Known for building bespoke game engines for all its past releases, the Texan outfit has become a cornerstone of FPS with *Doom*, *Quake*, the original *Wolfenstein* games and *Rage*.

Developer History

Doom
1993 [PC]
Quake
1996 [PC/N64]
Doom 3
2004 [PC]
Rage
2011 [PS3/Xbox 360/PC]

High Point

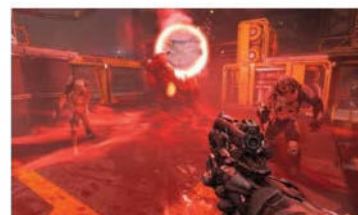
Back in 1999, id chose to take the moreish multiplayer of the *Quake* series and tweak it into the impeccable social shooter that is *Quake 3 Arena*. It's so good that it's still in pro tournament play today.

mucho destruction) add a very satisfying, *Left 4 Dead* vibe online.

It's a bold move for id Software, but it's one that feels like an instant detox from all those regenerative, cover-based tropes we've become so accustomed to. That's not to say *Doom* is a complete throwback to the ways of old - id has woven in just enough modern systems to keep things nice and spicy. Upgrade paths help adjust your blood-soaked journey into the heart of Mars and Hell itself (more on that lovely locale in a sec) by offering purchasable skills that shape your emerging playstyle.

Of course, it wouldn't be a *Doom* game if there wasn't a good offering of Martian topography and Hellish hotspots. Both locales have been given a reimagining, and the Texan developer's fresh take on the underworld is something to be savoured. One section will see you in front of a giant, statuesque head and arm buried in the ground - except this is no sunken art project. It's the remains of a Titan, a monolithic beast that once roamed Hell. So of course, we'll be jumping down its gaping maw and spending most of the level shredding and neck-snapping demons in the confines of its ancient belly.

The new SnapMap feature also has us intrigued. The new Forge-style mode gives players the tools to create bespoke maps, complete with demons, traps and more. Its modular design is all about empowering the player fast, and considering it'll be available to both PC and console players, we imagine it'll catch on in no time.



EXPLORE THE TECH INSIDE

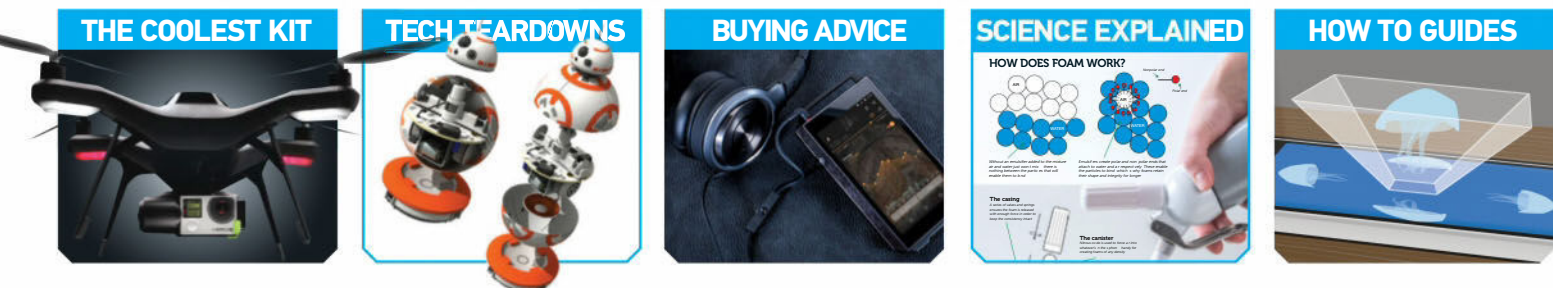
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Homefront: The Revolution

CONCEPT ■ A first-person shooter in which you play as a resistance fighter seeking to overcome a foe that greatly outmatches you in strength and sophistication

Altering the course of history

A revolution is not a bed of roses. A revolution is a struggle between the future and the past," said Fidel Castro. It's an odd quote to communicate when talking about a game that is ultimately about rose tinted, Americana-fuelled visions of liberty and freedom, but the Cuban's words are peculiarly apt in this context. *Homefront: The Revolution* has certainly not been a bed of roses, and its creation has unquestionably been a struggle between past and future.

Having gone through multiple years of development, changed design hands and, thanks to the collapse of THQ in 2013, moved between publishers, *The Revolution* will have achieved a great feat by simply presenting its vision of a dystopian future America to its audience. That past struggle, of course, will invariably affect its future success.

Videogame design tropes and fashions change at a pace simply not seen across other entertainment industries, a fact intensified and, in large part, facilitated by, the unyielding obsession with technological advancement across the medium. Any mainstream release that slips and misses its deadline is, therefore, running the risk of seeing its core ideals and structure already being considered outdated when it finally does arrive.

The Revolution is hoping to overcome this by fighting its battle across a different front to that of most its first-person shooter peers, abandoning any sort of competitive multiplayer in favour of a co-operative angle. Co-op is not by any means new to the genre, but the dismissal of team deathmatch, capture the flag et al is certainly unusual. There is more than one publisher that considers such things essential.

Set after the events of its single player campaign, co-op sees up to four players joining forces to rid Philadelphia, icon of American liberty, of the Korean People's Army (KPA) that has successfully taken over the country. Supposedly, despite being set after the fact, the events of co-op do not spoil the narrative of single player. However, the fact that the KPA is still in control at the birth of the co-op campaign suggests that you do not win the day for your country when playing solo.

Dambuster is keen to explain that, while the overarching concept of an occupied America remains intact, the finer details of the plot are not informed by what was presented in the original *Homefront*. This is not a sequel, explains the studio, it's a reboot.

One way of reading that: some distance from the mediocre original is beneficial on a critical level, but some grounding in a familiar brand is sure to give consumers and stakeholders greater confidence. Cynicism aside, though, *The Revolution* is testing some interesting ideas with its co-op offering.

For one, there exists a robust skill tree and weapon/gadget customisation system that allows each team member to fulfil different roles. One can focus on strength and an ability to flush out enemies at close-quarters, whilst someone else can take the sniper role. Then there are medic-like boosts, advantages to mastering gadgetry and bonuses for scavenging ammo.

How you decide to mix and match your abilities is down to you, but it certainly pays

"The first game was much more of a military shooter-by-numbers. You were a soldier in the American army fighting against the invaders"

STEPHEN RHODES, DAMBUSTER STUDIOS

to enter the fray with a diverse setup given the level of difficulty. Certainly, for a game designed with mass-appeal in mind, the KPA represents a serious threat - even on 'medium' difficulty. The open(ish) maps are not wholly pre-determined with enemies occupying specific zones. Instead, a partially random system of deployment is used that sees different numbers and types of soldiers

The idea is that you should never be able to predict from where, and by exactly who, you're going to come under fire from, even after multiple playthroughs of the same mission. If Dambuster can pull off this degree of diversity, and balance it in such a way that each encounter straddles that precise point of challenge-but-not-frustration, then it might just be able to overcome the development hell *The Revolution* endured. If it can't, it's doomed to fizzle out before it gets going. The FPS pool is, after all, crowded. No one said revolutions were easy.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Deep Silver
Developer:
Dambuster Studios
Release:
20 May 2016
Players:
1 (1-4 Online)

Publisher Profile

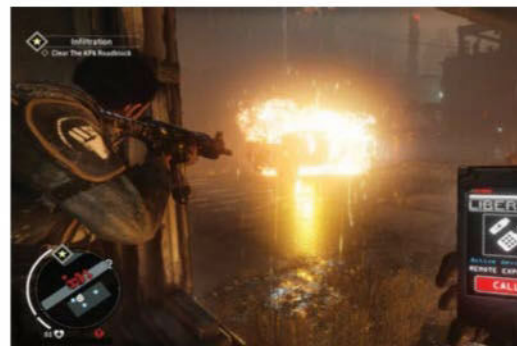
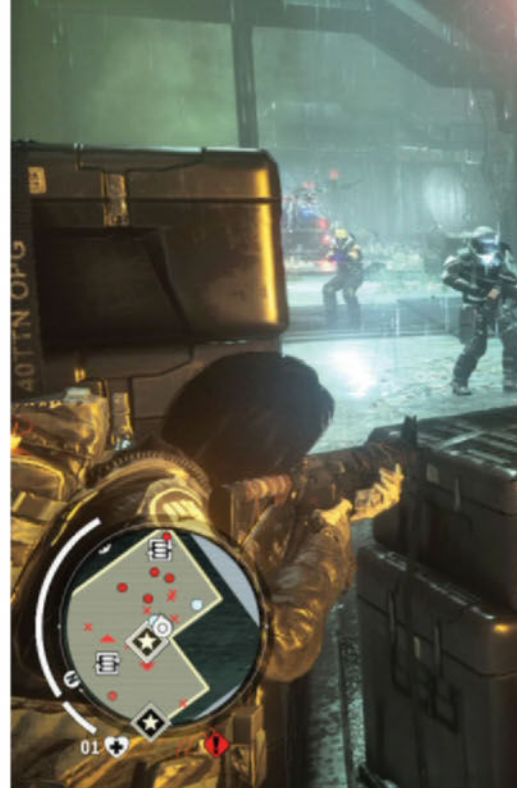
Founded in 2002, Deep Silver is wholly owned by German company Koch Media. Thus far, the publisher has released over 200 games across genres as diverse as strategy, role-playing, first-person shooters, sports and racing. It acquired the *Homefront* brand following the collapse of THQ.

Publisher History

Risen 3 **2014** [Multi]
Saints Row IV **2013** [Multi]
Dead Island **2011** [Multi]
Metro 2033 **2010** [Multi]
Anno 1701 **2006** [PC]

High Point

Metro 2033 is a divisive title, and not an especially successful on a commercial level, but its long-term impact on the direction of narrative-focused first-person shooters has been profound. A modern classic that deserves your attention.



■ Above: Standing out in the open and facing down the KPA directly is not typically a good strategy.

■ Different KPA units have different strengths and weaknesses. The 'heavy', for instance, can absorb an incredible amount of damage.



GOING GUERRILLA

As a resistance fighter you must rely on guerrilla tactics to overcome a KPA force that is superior to you across the board. You and your comrades can't compete in terms of numbers, weaponry, surveillance etc. Therefore, the principles of gameplay and narrative must promote that sense of inferiority at all times.

"We need mechanics that would facilitate the player feeling like an underdog in this struggle. The guerrilla toolkit and the way you can convert weapons... it's all very ad-hoc and adaptable during the battle," explains Stephen Rhodes, narrative designer.

"The first game was much more of a military shooter-by-numbers, whereas this is more of a case of you fighting back after the war is already lost. We needed to design mechanics to really bring that out."

■ Left: Gadgets are a crucial part of your arsenal, with explosive options often representing the only safe means to eliminate bigger vehicles and mounted weapons. Below: Your visual appearance and loadout can be customised before starting a mission, and you can also decide how to spend your levelling up across various skill trees. It pays to spread skills and tools across your co-op team to prevent uniformity.




Horizon Zero Dawn

CONCEPT ■ An open-world action-adventure RPG that sees humanity fighting to survive in rural future dominated by giant robot dinosaurs

Guerrilla Games proves life after Killzone is a Jurassic lark

Horizon Zero Dawn remains one of the most intriguing releases on the 2016 release

calendar - and that's saying something when you consider how strong this year is already shaping up to be. A new heroine, setting and IP converge to create an experience we've seemingly never seen before. Hunting robo dinosaurs with bows and arrows? A story set 1,000 years in the future? And not one cockney-voiced neo-nazi in sight? Colour us excited.

The fact it's coming from a developer that's been working on the same PlayStation-exclusive franchise for the last 12 years means *Horizon Zero Dawn* is a breath of fresh air for both us and Guerrilla Games. 



CRAFT WORK

■ Even from the snippets of footage we've seen so far, there's a whole ecosystem of mechanical beasts roaming the lands of *Horizon*. Thankfully, those creatures aren't just post-historic pincushions for your bow - they're a bountiful font of resources, too. As is the trend these days, Aloy can craft items on the go once she's collected scraps shot from the bodies of her prey. We even see Aloy take a cannon blown off a Thunderjaw and use it back on the poor/terrifying thing.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Netherlands
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Guerrilla Games
Release: 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

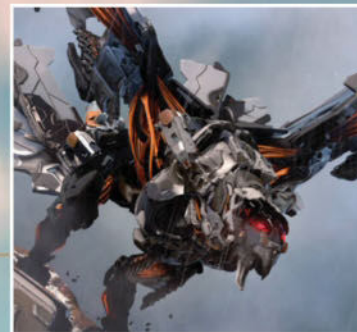
Guerrilla Games has been cutting its teeth on the PlayStation brand ever since *Shellshock: Nam '67* hit PS2 in 2004 and it went full-on exclusive in the same year with the very first *Killzone*. The Dutch developer has stuck with the politically-minded sci-fi shooter ever since, but has now turned its attention to the exciting post-post-apocalyptic world of *Horizon*.

Developer History

Killzone: Liberation 2006 [PSP]
Killzone 2 2009 [PS3]
Killzone 3 2011 [PS3]
Killzone: Shadow Fall 2013 [PS4]

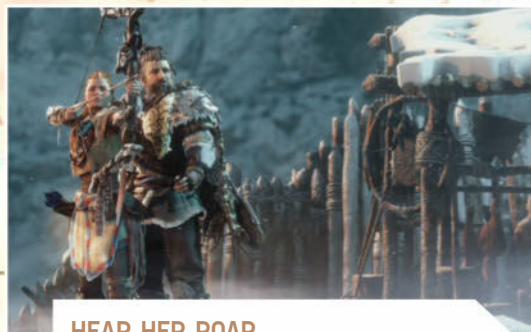
High Point

While *Shadow Fall* had its moments (mainly the open-world bits Guerrilla showed off pre-release), 2011's *Killzone 2* remains the studio's benchmark for quality. Great pacing and impeccable level design.



FANTASTIC BEASTS

■ The Thunderjaw of E3 isn't the only nuts and bolts entity roaming the wilds of *Horizon* - so far we've seen an interesting plethora of beasts, each with a set of unique behaviours. 'Compy' like dinos with headlights for faces are going to get on our nerves fast and as for the dino with a UFO for a head? Well, that's certainly going to take more than a few explosive arrows to bring down.



HEAR HER ROAR

■ Aloy is the red-headed protagonist of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* and this battle-hardened survivor is more than a match for the giant, mechanical monstrosities that roam the rurally-reclaimed world around her. An outcast from her tribe, Aloy has learned to hunt her robo adversaries and sets out on a path to unravel the mysteries plaguing her world. She's a fearless huntress, but there's a tenderness that will hopefully give her a depth some of *Killzone's* characters lacked.

"We wanted the player to feel primitive, so we decided that the tribes would have very limited knowledge of technology"

MATHIJS DE JONG, GAME DIRECTOR, GUERRILLA GAMES

BACK TO THE PRIMITIVE

■ The refreshing lack of ballistic weapons isn't just Guerrilla Games trying to be different - it's a conscious decision that ties directly into the primitive ecosystem the tribes of *Horizon* are living in. Relying on weapons such as daggers or bows, tools that require close quarters combat or finite resources reaffirms your place in this world - robo dinos such as the moody Thunderjaw we saw at E3 last year are the dominant species and Aloy and co. are cattle by comparison.



INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin:
USA
Publisher:
505 Games
Developer:
Three One Zero
Release:
28 March 2016 (PC)
Players:
1

Developer Profile

This is Three One Zero's very first game, but it's from a team made up of creators that have been in the business for some time. Lead by former Microsoft game director Adam Orth, the team is bringing *Adrift* to Oculus Rift and PC for the launch of the VR platform followed by console releases later in the year.



Adrift

CONCEPT ■ As the survivor of a catastrophic space station incident you must survive, piece together what happened, repair your escape pod and return to earth

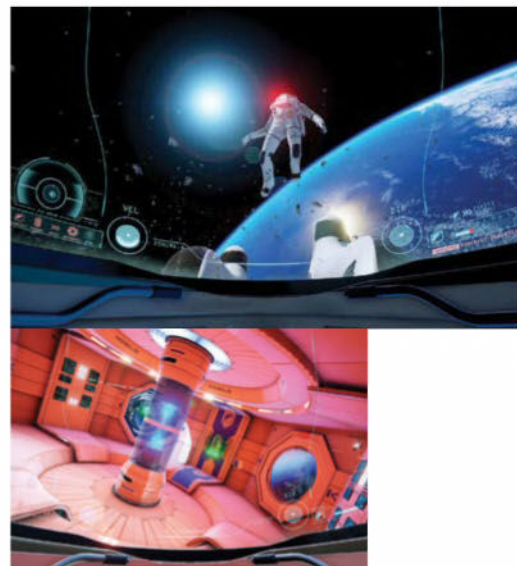
Survival of the floatiest

We have a lot more sympathy for that Stormtrooper in A New Hope who bangs his head as he enters a room on the Death Star now. Spatial awareness in a helmet can be a tricky proposition. It's one of the smaller worries you need to contend with when playing *Adrift* as you float in near-orbit through a shattered space station, desperately trying to survive. With everything in motion and only your EVA suit controls to help you navigate in zero gravity, you'll be banging your head against a lot of things – in the literal sense rather than as an expression of frustration.

The physicality of navigating the Northstar IV Station that Three One Zero has managed to capture is really quite exceptional. As you float through and grab at the environment around you as Commander Alex Oshima, you are sucked into her reactions and the way she interacts with objects. Quite realistically, she doesn't feel the need to talk to herself about what's happening, but rather grunts when she bashes into things and sighs in relief

■ Above: *Adrift* is set well into the future as humanity begins to put plans together for greater exploration of the solar system and beyond.

■ Above: At its heart, this is a pure survival game with management of limited resources driving you forward. Find oxygen, limit damage to your suit and try and find a way home.



when something good happens. You begin to read her subtle cues as a backup to the HUD graphics depicting the stability of your suit and the level of oxygen you have to breathe. While these displays may tell you a lot, her own reactions are just as telling and help build tension and suspense in an otherwise relatively limited frame of feedback.

As you tune into the breathing and subtle sound effects of the game it dawns on you just how quiet *Adrift* really is. There's no music overlaying the drama, building up the action. Audio logs by your recently deceased crewmates feature some music and descriptions of your mission, but it's not forced on top of the action. Death in space is a quiet, personal threat from the vast expanse around you. There's a great sense of isolation that's very potent indeed.

Which really gets to the core of how focused this game really is. Three One Zero isn't over-stretching its concept with *Adrift*. This is a pure survival game in the end, with the hunt for and strategic use of oxygen pods being your most important objective, followed by an unfolding puzzle of finding a way back to earth. Navigating the wreckage while minimising damage and conserving oxygen will be tough. Zero gravity is not exactly a form of movement conducive to accuracy, as inertia throws you in directions you may not have intended. We can't wait to strap a VR headset on and go even deeper into this experience, but even on console later this year, *Adrift* should be quite something to behold.



“Short of actually being in space, this is the best way to experience zero gravity”

ADAM ORTH, THREE ONE ZERO





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■ Bored of traditional MOBAs? Epic is working hard to ensure that Paragon plays more like a traditional third-person shooter than any of its competition in the space. This should make the action more immediate and personal than ever.

GET DECKED FOR SUCCESS

PARAGON WILL FEATURE a surprising level of character customisation, with players encouraged to collect cards through play that are then used to build and upgrade hero decks. While you'll need a deck to go into battle – with cards used to effect your powers and special abilities – the deck can also be altered in battle should you need to change your strategy on the fly. Epic believes "different combinations dramatically change gameplay and unlock deep strategic choice," though it has already caused some controversy, with players worried *Paragon* will swerve too deeply into pay-to-win territory with the cards. It's too early to say for certain though, our first indication should be when the game launches into premium early access.



Paragon

CONCEPT ■ Two teams of five heroes drop into a three-lane valley and do battle over chokepoints, checkpoints and glowing spherical balls to find victory

You might have heard of the niche new genre, MOBAs?

Epic Games is looking to create a MOBA for the *Gears Of War* generation. For whatever reason, multiplayer online battle arena games have become synonymous with high-fantasy action and teenage kids that make disproportionate amounts of money from 'bossing the jungle' on the eSports scene. Epic is looking to change that singular view of the genre as it drags the action to a more personable third-person angle and shifts the combat focus onto brutal melee assaults and skilful gunplay. That isn't to say that *Paragon* will simply be a traditional third-person shooter hiding out in a three-lane arena design, it's that Epic has identified the areas in which it feels the MOBA isn't delivering, and is striving to fill the void. Plenty of other developers have tried and failed in the past, and if it weren't for Epic's pedigree in the third-person action genre we'd wonder whether this was a fool's errand. But Epic sure does know its action and that raises expectations.

If you've ever seen one of those glorious CG trailers from the likes of *League Of Legends* or *DOTA 2* in the past and wondered why the action is never quite as explosive or engaging in reality, then *Paragon* might be the game for you. Sure, *Paragon* features every MOBA staple that you could possibly imagine, but it's nice to see them rendered in the Unreal Engine 4 at least. It's got maps designed around the core three-lane structure, jungles connecting them, minions running wild through them and powerful towers

guarding checkpoints. *Paragon* is the opportunity to discover classic elements of the MOBA experience from a whole new perspective. It's that perspective switch that will make all the difference here.

Epic believes that swinging the camera in tightly behind the hero will make *Paragon* feel unique from its immediate competition. It means that team work is more imperative than ever; no longer will you have a bird's-eye view on the entire battle as it unfolds, instead *Paragon* will live and die by its moment-to-moment altercations. Each of the five members on your team will need to know their roles, build their hero appropriately and be prepared to communicate to organise lane surges and player traps. This third-person perspective also gives Epic the opportunity to demonstrate its mechanical expertise, with each hero coming equipped with a variety of offensive, defensive and movement-enhancing capabilities. Where you aim, when you attack and how you move is all deeply tied to your success or failure.

Having fully three-dimensional gameplay could be a real revolution for the MOBA genre, and *Paragon* is going a step above *Smite* in this regard. There's a surprising amount of verticality to the move-sets and map design, which only serves to make *Paragon* look more immediate than its competition. With projectiles

flying over your head, enemies swarming from all directions and cool-downs ticking away along the bottom of the screen, *Paragon* is positioning itself as a real breath of fresh air.

It's a huge statement of intent on the studio's part to bring *Paragon* as a free-to-play title across both PC and PlayStation 4. At this stage, it's becoming increasingly difficult to crack any of the big MOBAs – unless you've got more time than sense – and so *Paragon* is positioning itself as an easy way into the genre, for players that

"Skill matters – where you aim, when you attack, and how you move. Paragon puts you in direct control of the action like you've never experienced in a MOBA"

PRESS RELEASE, EPIC GAMES

are more familiar with third-person action than intricate lane control tactics. You'll be spending your time agonising over the immediate battles in front of you – using the skills you've picked up mastering the likes of *Gears Of War* to find victory – and that's hugely exciting. But you needn't take our word for it, *Paragon* will go live with an open beta before the start of summer 2016 so that you can give it a try for yourself and we would highly recommend you take advantage of that opportunity.

INFORMATION

Details

Format:

PS4, PC

Origin:

USA

Publisher:

Epic Games

Developer:

In-house

Release:

Q1 2016

Players:

1-10

Developer Profile

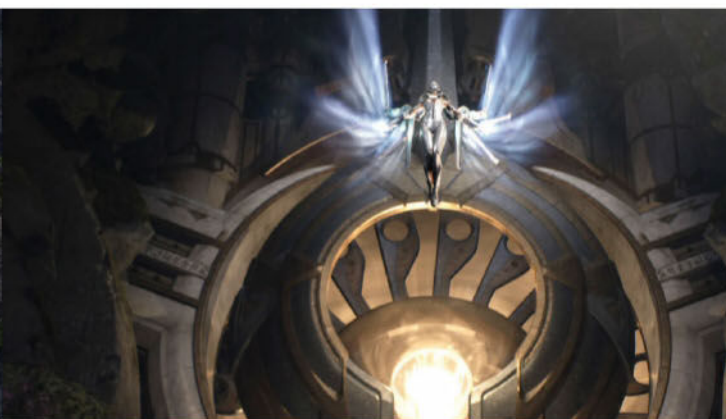
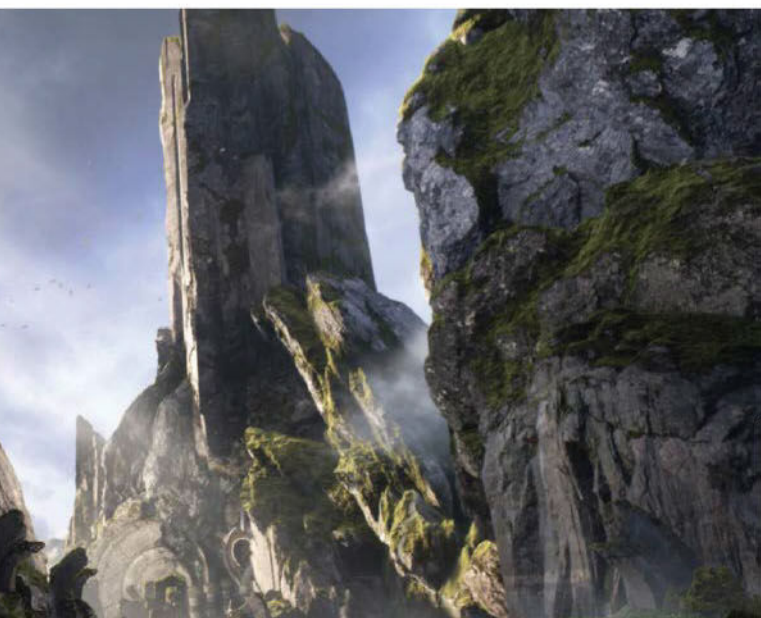
Founded in 1991 under the guise of Epic MegaGames, the studio developed titles like *Overkill* before changing its name to Epic Games in 1999. A new focus was put on developing its Unreal Engine tech, leading to *Gears Of War* in 2006.

Developer History

Gears Of War
2006 [Xbox 360]
Unreal Tournament 3
2007 [Xbox 360, PS3, PC]
Gears Of War 2
2008 [Xbox 360]
Gears Of War 3
2011 [Xbox 360]

High Point

Developed as a showcase of its stunning Unreal Engine 3 tech, Epic delivered the first truly spectacular Xbox 360 game in *Gears Of War*, setting the benchmark for third-person action.



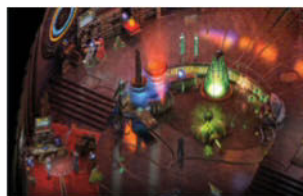
■ Above: Epic is yet to confirm how many heroes *Paragon* will launch with, though it's expected plenty more will be made available over time as DLC. Left: *Paragon* will be coming to PS4 and PC in 2016, and Epic is still looking into cross-platform multiplayer support.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENERA

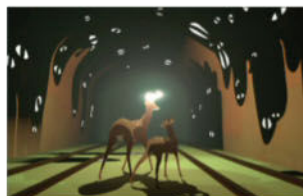
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: inXile Entertainment
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



BILLED AS the spiritual successor to 1999's *Planescape: Torment* and with over \$5 million in pledges currently sitting in the bank, *Torment: Tides of Numenera* may have had a few release date alterations since it was first announced back in 2013, but you can check it out on Steam Early Access if you're keen to sample just a sliver of what developer, inXile, has in store for its fantastical Monte Cook tabletop inspired RPG.

WAY TO THE WOODS

Format: PC
Publisher: N/A
Developer: Anthony Tan
ETA: Q4 2016



DEVELOPED BY 16 year-old student, Anthony Tan, *Way To The Woods* is a visually stunning adventure title that puts you in control of a deer and her young fawn. Currently in pre-alpha and with no funding in place, the game is said to borrow elements and inspiration from the likes of animation classics, *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, as well as Naughty Dog's show stopping *The Last Of Us*.

SHINESS: THE LIGHTNING KINGDOM

Format: PS4, PC, Mac, Xbox One
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Developer: Enigami
ETA: Q3 2016



SUCCESSFULLY KICKSTARTED last year and picked up by Focus Home Interactive *Shiness: The Lightning Kingdom* is part Anime, part comic book and part video game that looks like it's been heavily influenced by the *Naruto* series. With multiple worlds to explore, a deep combat system culled from the developer's love of brawlers and a universe that needs saving, *The Lightning Kingdom* looks like one to watch in 2016.

FRAGMENTS OF HIM

Format: PC, Xbox One
Publisher: SassyBot Studio
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



CURRENTLY IN development since 2012 and the result of a Gamejam session, *Fragments of Him* is an interesting title to boot. Attempting to explore death and how the loss of a person affects those around them, the game's narrative unfurls after the passing of a young man called Will. In it you're able to interact with Will's lover, his friend, mother and, in particular, Will's own memories to further explore each of their lives.

BOUND

Format: PS4
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Plastic Studios
ETA: Q4 2016



WE CAN'T think of any other game out there where the main character is a ballerina, so here's to *Linger in the Shadows* and *Datura* developer, Plastic Studios, for nabbing that accolade. Described as a 3D platformer with lush visuals, *Bound*, we're told, is attempting to mix deep narrative with hardcore platforming mechanics. Billed as one big puzzle, the studio is promising to deliver PS4 fans a 'not-game, which is also a game'.

MACHIAVILLAIN

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Wild Factor
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



REMEMBER JOSS Whedon and Drew Goddard's stupendously brilliant *Cabin In The Woods*? Well, somebody has only gone and made a game that's inspired by it. *Machiavillain* puts you in control of a haunted house where the goal is to use various horror movie tropes to slay unsuspecting teenagers. This looks like a deliciously dark good time that blends scares, monsters and buckets of gore.

BETWEEN THE CITY AND THE NEEDLE

Format: PC
Publisher: Nightmare Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



BETWEEN THE City and The Needle is, according to the developer, a conversational puzzler, which basically tasks you with detecting terrifying aliens in human form through a series of psychological tests. Throw in a bit of exploration, numerous secrets to be uncovered in the shady government facility you operate out of and you've got yourself one of the most intriguing looking titles on this list. Fans of *Papers, Please* should take note.

SLIME RANCHER

Format: PC
Publisher: Monomi Park
Developer: In-house
ETA: TBC (Steam Early Access)



ALREADY ON Steam Early Access, *Slime Rancher* casts you as a plucky rancher wielding a nifty piece of gear called the Vacpack, which lets you to suck up and blast out pretty much anything in the world that hasn't been nailed down. Besides rustling weird little creatures called Slimes, there doesn't seem to be much else to do, so here's hoping the developer can add a little extra courtesy of player feedback.



DELAYED – Uncharted: A Thief's End

Previously scheduled for a March launch, Naughty Dog's closing chapter in the Nathan Drake chronicles has been pushed back until April 26. The five-week delay is down to the studio pooling all its resources to polish every inch of code.

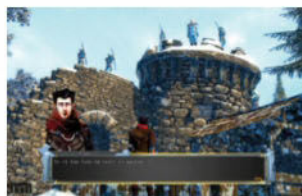


DELAYED – Scalebound

Originally set for a holiday 2016 launch, Platinum Games' *Scalebound* has now been pushed into 2017 so that the team can deliver on its "ambitious vision and ensure that *Scalebound* lives up to expectations."

ZENITH

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Infinigon
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q2 2016



GREENLIT ON Steam since January, *Zenith* is a golden-era style RPG that promises plenty of laughs, a healthy serving of parody and a cast of quirky characters in a weird and wonderful world. Taking control of Argus, a wizard desperate for some peace and quiet, *Zenith* looks to be plenty of fun with some decent fighting mechanics. With a release date pencilled in for the not too distant future, we'll be bringing you more news on this soon.

PROJECT RESURGENCE

Format: PC
Publisher: Nectar Game Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INSPIRED BY the classic RPG games of the late Nineties, *Project Resurgence* is a heavily narrative driven indie title. Featuring a raft of customisation, branching dialogue and combat, *Resurgence* is being touted as a game based on choice and consequence that blends brawling with stealth. At the time of print it had just achieved funding on Kickstarter, so if the idea floats your boat you may well be in luck.

HUMAN: FALL FLAT

Format: PC
Publisher: No Brakes Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



HUMAN: FALL Flat puts you in control of a character called Bob. Bob keeps having strange dreams about falling. Bob finds himself wandering through surreal, floating worlds, each of which involves solving numerous physics-based puzzles. Bob has no superpowers, but with the right tools Bob can do anything. Bob's dreams aren't just filled with puzzles, there are plenty of distractions. We like Bob. Let's all be like Bob.

RIDES WITH STRANGERS

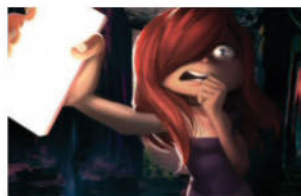
Format: PC
Publisher: Reflect Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



DEVELOPED BY the boys and girls at Reflect Studios, *Rides With Strangers* casts you as Elora, a college graduate pursuing her dream job. Her car breaks down in the middle of the night on the way to the interview and she's forced to hitch a ride with a perverted looking Pastor. Is he evil? Will she be forced to leap from the car to save herself? We'll find out when the game ships later in the year.

NOOZH

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: WANNABE
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



NOOZH IS a narrative driven dungeon crawler that follows a young girl, her recurring nightmare, and how it ultimately begins to affect her throughout the day. The basics of the game are simple: in the nightmare you need to solve puzzles in order to wake up while avoiding NOOZh, the dream world monster hunting you. In the waking world you control her eating, reading and sleeping habits. Colour us excited.

SPACE REVOLVER

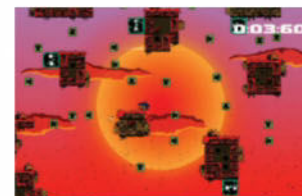
Format: PC, Mac, Linux-
Publisher: Moonfall Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INSPIRED BY *Towerfall* and *Samurai Gunn* with gameplay ripped from the likes of *Capcom's Megaman X* and set in a world that owes more than its fair share of debt to *Cowboy Bebop*, *Space Revolver* is a quirky little looker that's being sold by the developer as a 'shoot your own adventure' title. In the game's story mode you can pull a gun on anyone at any point during a conversation and slay them. Sold.

FENIX FURIA

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Publisher: Green Lava Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



ORIGINALLY TITLED *Fenix Rage*, the freshly titled *Fenix Furia* from Green Lava Studios is a 2D platformer that reminds us a lot of *Sonic The Hedgehog*. With 200 levels, instant respawn, and nine different worlds, *Fenix Rage* looks like it could present a dastardly challenge when it ships on consoles later this year. The developer has been tweaking some levels after taking on board player feedback, so expect more details on this one.

REFUGE

Format: PC, Mac, iOS
Publisher: Fox Rogers
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INSPIRED BY the look of games like *Limbo*, *Refuge* is a survival title that takes place on a mysterious settlement called The Ark. There are two ways to play through the game according to the one-man development team, Fox Rogers: hunt your opponent or out-survive them. We know which one we'll be choosing. It didn't quite hit its Kickstarter goal, but we understand the game lives on.

OVERV



AS **BLIZZARD** TAKES ON THE FPS,
SHOULD YOU BE FEARFUL FOR THE
STATE OF YOUR SPARE TIME?

WATCH



It's really important for us to be listening to the community, because with *Overwatch*, as soon as it launches, it belongs to them just as much as it belongs to us. We want to make sure *Overwatch* is a cool environment that they enjoy hanging out in. We don't want to do anything that really detracts from their sense of enjoyment in the game. We feel like the community works with us; they own our games as much as we do... We want to do right by the players"



Spend any time listening to game director Jeff Kaplan talk about the development phase of *Overwatch* and it'll sound like Blizzard is perpetually stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rock being the studio's die hard fans, those that have stuck with the demonic destroyers of spare time for over two decades; the hard place just so happens to house everyone else that loves to whine on the Internet. Opinions are like voices and we all have a different kind – and Blizzard listens to every damn one.

DETAILING THE STRUGGLE WITH RANKED PLAY

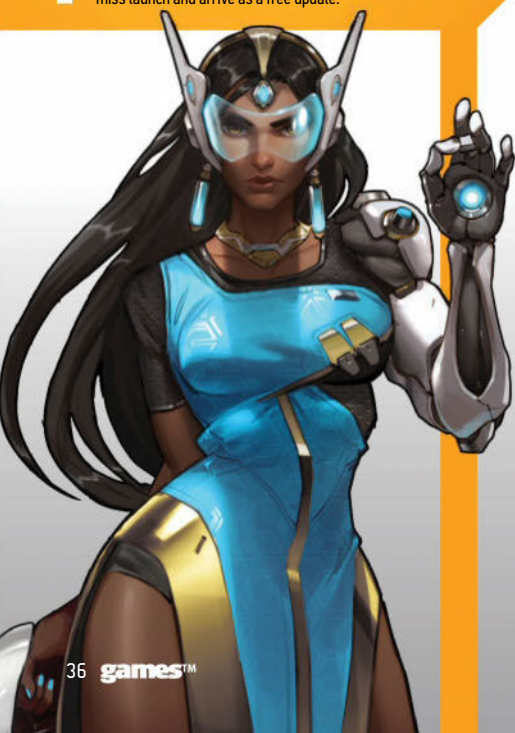
There's a very good chance that *Overwatch* will not include ranked play for launch. The team is still trying to find a way to make it work, without compromising its inviting atmosphere. It's a competitive game at heart, but with so much for players to get their heads around there's a chance players could revert back to old habits when the stakes are raised.

"We are heavily iterating on our ranked play design... Our hope is that it will be in by launch. Right now, we are trying very hard – and I'm hopeful and optimistic that we can make something happen – it's something the team is very motivated about," explains Jeff Kaplan.

Ranked is an interesting prospect for the design of *Overwatch*, and aspiring professional players too, as it's the meta-game established in this side of the title that will likely lead to the foundations of *Overwatch's* eSports scene. "Ranked play will be a more competitive area of the game that not only pro or semi-pro players would engage in, but also a lot of us amateurs who are very competitive. We're hoping to design ranked play in a way where it helps inform and feed into the eSport level and how the game is played at a professional level."



■ Ranked play is important to Blizzard, though it will likely miss launch and arrive as a free update.



» That makes *Overwatch* something of a revelation. This might be Blizzard's first new IP in 18 years, and something of a creative departure for its team of veteran RPG and strategy designers, but it's treating production like an independent project. Everything from the business model to *Overwatch's* design decisions are being constantly run past millions of backseat developers. Blizzard fanatics, first-person shooter fans, and gamers eagerly pitching into a quality assurance drive in the hope to receive something colourful, something fresh, and (dare we even say it) something *fun* in return.

Overwatch is a huge deal for studio and community alike, and with the June release window in sight, time is running out. "Sure, there is a lot of pressure," he says. "But it's also a tremendous honour. Not only do we love the community's feedback and that they set a high bar of expectation for us, but we consider ourselves as a part of that community, so we have that same bar of expectation," he continues eagerly, though whether *Overwatch* – even with its perpetual Alpha and Beta tests – can match the hype and anticipation it's generated? Well, that's where we come in.

INTRODUCING YOUR LATEST OBSESSION

Blizzard, just as it has done with everything from *Diablo III* to *World Of Warcraft*, has opted for a different, more open approach to traditional development studios; a commitment to conversation, if you will. We've had time with *Overwatch*, torn through its colourful urban environments with shotgun and bow in hand, and we've been surprised by what we've found. This isn't your typical first-person shooter. It's time to leave those cynical expectations at the door; Blizzard is about to make the FPS fun again.

"There's a lot of amazing FPS games out there, and players are really enjoying them, but we felt like there was a particular segment that wasn't being served," explains Kaplan. "For us, that was a really fun, actiony, competitive, and over-the-top type of shooter. One that features abilities, really dramatic movement, and the feeling that you're really embodying epic heroes that are larger than life. Focusing in on individual heroes rather than creating a game where there is an everyman soldier and you're just getting different versions of the M16 or the AK47."

Kaplan will go on to describe *Overwatch* as a "bright new future for shooters" on numerous occasions during our time with him, and he might just be onto something. Though we'd put it as simply as this: imagine somebody grabbed *Team Fortress 2* by the scruff of the neck and stuffed *Heroes Of The Storm* right down its colourful, beautiful throat. In the aftermath of such a violent coming together, a thrilling six-versus-six competitive FPS for PC, PS4 and Xbox One emerges – the frantic action of the former paired alongside the character versatility and strategic depth of the latter. That is *Overwatch* in a deliriously hyperbolic nutshell.

The combination of surface MOBA sensibilities and shooter mechanics should indeed be appreciated, and

"BLIZZARD IS AIMING FOR FULL 1:1 PARITY BETWEEN THE CONSOLE AND PC"

enjoyed for sure, but should not to be misconstrued as to what *Overwatch* is actually offering. One of the biggest problems

Blizzard has faced thus far, even with its beta running for months, is that *Overwatch* is routinely confused as a mobile online battle arena game with shooter elements thrown in for good measure. That's something Blizzard is eager to step away from.

"The comparison is flattering, although I totally agree with you; it's a little misleading," agrees Kaplan, our assertion that *Overwatch* could face an identity crisis if this idea is left unchecked seems to be right on the money. "I think the reason people immediately jump to that [conclusion], is that we haven't seen a bunch of hero based games. Obviously there's these juggernauts out there – *League Of Legends*, *DOTA 2* and *Heroes Of The Storm*, games that have huge communities playing them – so people assume that if it's a game with different heroes and different abilities then what should we call it? How do we label that and put it in a box? What's the common language? For a lot of people, that's what MOBA means."

In many respects, *Overwatch* is coming along at the worst possible time; console players are still wary of the MOBA. *Overwatch* is likely sharing the same space in your brain box as Gearbox's similarly colourful *Battleborn* – a game cursed by a perpetually confused marketing message regarding its genre intentions. But *Overwatch* is first and foremost an FPS, it just isn't like any other.

"I always associate MOBA not only with having unique heroes or champions, but usually there's in-match progression; you're levelling up towards the end of a match, fighting creep waves and that sort of thing – *Overwatch* doesn't really have any of that... Our



■ **Left** *Overwatch* features 21 incredibly unique playable Heroes. Each of them is so different, in fact, that they all feel like they could have existed within their own games.



■ **Above** At the end of a round, *Overwatch* displays the 'Play Of The Game' a moment of gameplay excellence.



■ **Above** Each character has an array of skills and abilities available to them from the start – no need to unlock them.

OFFENCE THESE CHARACTERS ARE AGILE RANGED FIGHTERS, USING MOBILITY AND DPS.



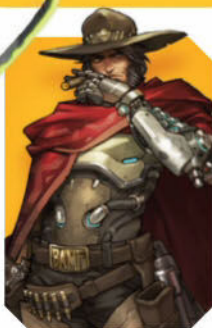
GENJI

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Katana

VANITY QUOTE

"Even if I sacrifice my body, I will never sacrifice my honor"



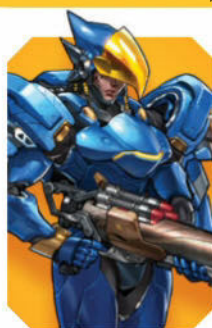
MCCREE

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Peacekeeper Revolver

VANITY QUOTE

"Justice ain't gonna dispense itself"



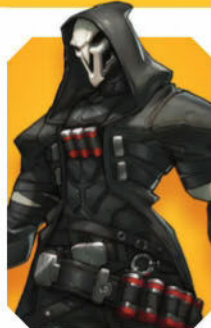
PHARAH

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Rocket launcher

VANITY QUOTE

"I will protect the innocent"



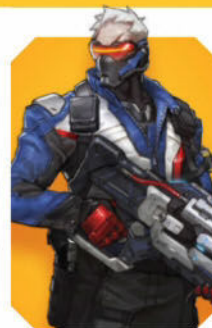
REAPER

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Twin Hellfire shotguns

VANITY QUOTE

"Death walks among you"



SOLDIER: 76

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Heavy Pulse rifle

VANITY QUOTE

"We're all soldiers now"



TRACER

DIFFICULTY ⚡ ⚡ ⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Twin Pulse Pistols

VANITY QUOTE

"Cheers, love! The cavalry's here!"

gameplay is very FPS orientated," Kaplan says, though he isn't concerned that this MOBA misconception will discourage players from getting involved, in fact, he's endlessly impressed by how switched on players have become to the way games are made. "One of the things that's been really awesome throughout this beta process is to see just how savvy players have become when it comes to game design and game theory."

And that means that players are really beginning to understand where the real fun of *Overwatch* lies for themselves. There are 21 heroes split between four classes – Offensive, Defensive, Tank and Support – and the way in which you utilise these characters can have a dramatic effect on the outcome of games. That's

down, in part at least, to *Overwatch* featuring no typical team deathmatch game mode, or penalty to switching between its characters. Instead, it has tailor made modes to speak to its team-based competitive nature, with players encouraged to jump between classes and heroes on the fly to respond to new threats.

Playable Heroes in a console game isn't entirely new, it's just uncommon. *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III* introduced distinct 'specialists' into play last year, for example, though your progression and playtime was still fuelled by the allure of a better K/D spread and new weapon attachments. *Overwatch*, on the other hand, is a competitive team-based game at heart and inherently objective focused to boot, but not in the way you might

commonly associate with *Battlefield*. Rounds don't revolve around rattling up the scoreboard with kills, nor is it about running wild as a lone wolf, *Overwatch* at its core is defined by how well you and a group of perfect strangers can "stand together as a group of heroes and succeed, or be overcome by the enemy."

"I think another reason we've attracted the attention of the MOBA crowd is that FPS traditionally – even if they have team-based modes to them – tend to be have very lone-wolf gameplay," considers Kaplan. "In team deathmatch, for example, you're usually not co-ordinating with your team you're just kind of running around killing people. I think the MOBA crowd really loves coordinated team play, and objective based

“WE WANT PLAYERS TO THINK ABOUT HOW THEY CAN WORK TOGETHER TO HAVE SUCCESS”

» coordinated team play. I think *Overwatch* has that in spades and that's another reason we get compared.”

“I think players understand that in a game like *Overwatch* – where you have these individual heroes – if you did something just like deathmatch and that was the only mode to the game, you couldn't really have a hero like Lúcio, Mercy or Symmetra be really competitive. But when the game becomes more team oriented and objective based and suddenly a Symmetra can be the difference between a win and a loss on the team – I think players are savvy to that.”

This is where potential problems for *Overwatch* arise. Each of the 21 characters are incredibly distinct, like they could exist in their own separate games. The maps are so compact that it can feel like you're being given a constant run around by players that can navigate the winding corridors and rooftops with GPS precision. The array of abilities each hero possesses can leave you feeling lost too. If you don't initially understand a heroes' strengths and weaknesses there's nothing worse than feeling like you're letting the side down with your ineptitude. But the truth is, *Overwatch* wants to make you a little uncomfortable.

The beauty of *Overwatch* though, is that it doesn't just suggest experimentation to overcome these feelings, it actively encourages it. Experimentation is a part of the moment-to-moment chaos. It's this design that ensures *Overwatch* will feel challenging at first, but, as the layers begin to peel away, players will eventually be able to slip into varying roles comfortably.

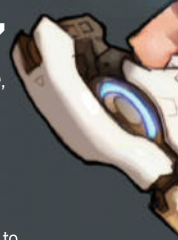
“We want to create a game that's as approachable to as many people as possible. At Blizzard we always love to speak to a very wide audience. We have fans that



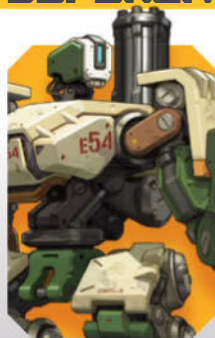
ESPORTS LEADING THE WAY

How carefully is Blizzard building *Overwatch* around eSports? Incredibly so. “eSports is extremely important to us,” considers Jeff Kaplan. “We have some very big plans for eSports with *Overwatch* – we're not entirely ready to talk about those just yet, we have a lot of details to work out before we present them.” That's because eSports is growing at an alarming rate, and with *Overwatch*

offering free hero and map updates in the future, it sounds to us like Blizzard needs *Overwatch* to thrive on the scene to keep engagement. Kaplan described the studio's ambition towards competitive top tier play as a “three-pronged trident,” with *Overwatch* needing to nail ranked, eSport and robust broadcast/spectator features to succeed in terms of competitive play.



DEFENSIVE PLACERS OF MINES AND TURRETS TO CONTROL OBJECTIVES AND PROTECT THE TEAM



BASTION

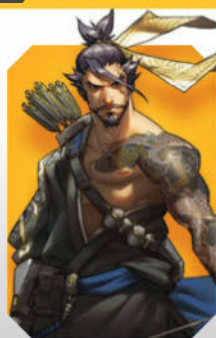
DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Submachine / Gatling gun

VANITY QUOTE

“Battle Automaton”



HANZO

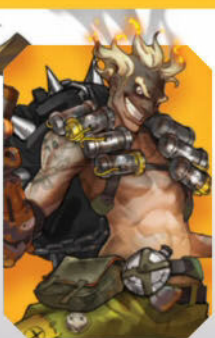
DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Storm bow

VANITY QUOTE

“With every death comes honor, with honor, redemption”



JUNKRAT

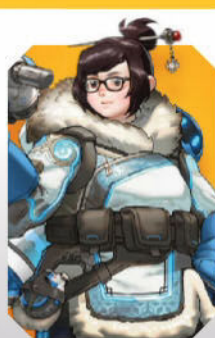
DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Frag launcher

VANITY QUOTE

“It's a perfect day for some mayhem”



MEI

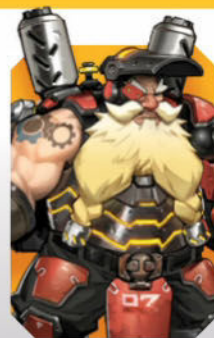
DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Endothermic Blasters

VANITY QUOTE

“Our world is worth fighting for”



TORBJÖRN

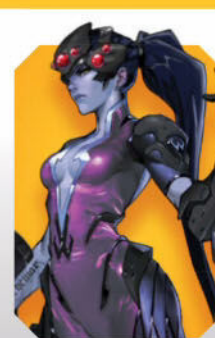
DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Rivet gun

VANITY QUOTE

“Build ‘em up, break ‘em down”



WIDOWMAKER

DIFFICULTY

WEAPON TYPE

Widow's kiss sniper rifle

VANITY QUOTE

“One shot, one kill”



span every genre, and fans that span every age group and skill level, we *need* to be really approachable. But for a multiplayer game – which all Blizzard games are – to really have longevity it needs depth to do that,” says Kaplan, giving us a window into the importance of such heavy Beta testing. “We love to design systems where, at first glance it looks really simple and that anybody can get into it and play it, but also for somebody in their 200th hour to discover something new that they couldn’t do before; that’s always been our goal.”

This all comes to a head during hero selection. With six players lining up in a lobby, Blizzard wants its players to be communicating towards selection. The studio has left enough freedom between its classes and characters that you can still pick your favourite, but also have enough flexibility to work with your team without compromising your own personal enjoyment. “We like for you – before the match starts – and your team to really think about team composition. We feel like there’s not really a right or wrong answer there, there’s no such thing as you absolutely shouldn’t do X, Y, or Z, we try to »

IN DISCUSSION WITH THE DIRECTOR

OVERWATCH’S GAME DIRECTOR, AND LEGENDARY WORLD OF WARCRAFT DESIGNER, **JEFF KAPLAN** IS A PASSIONATE MAN. YOU CAN HEAR THE ENTHUSIASM THROUGH HIS WORDS

HOW IMPORTANT WAS IT TO GET OVERWATCH ON PS4 AND XBOX ONE?

From day one we designed the game to be multi-platform, so a lot of our design decisions – like limiting the number of abilities the heroes had – was always with the gamepad in mind.

WILL OVERWATCH FEATURE CROSS-PLATFORM SUPPORT?

There will not be any cross platform support. Each platform will have its own eco system. Most of that is for fairness reasons. There are slight advantages and disadvantages to PC versus Xbox One versus PS4.

DID IT FEEL LIKE TREYARCH STOLE YOUR THUNDER A LITTLE WITH ITS INTRODUCTION OF ‘SPECIALISTS’ IN BLACK OPS III MULTIPLAYER LAST YEAR?

No, no, no! In fact, we have nothing but love and respect for Treyarch. We’ve met with them numerous times, they’ve helped us with some of our technology. Our kill cam was informed by Treyarch... We have a great relationship and we share ideas frequently with them.

SO THESE LOOT BOXES ARE GIVING AWAY AN ARRAY OF COSMETIC ITEMS, BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF I GET A DUPLICATE?

We also have a system called Credits and Unlocks. If you get duplicate items – let’s say you got two [of] the exact same skin – the second time you get it we reward you with Credits [instead], because we know there’s nothing you can do with it.



CAN WE USE THE CREDITS TO PURCHASE SPECIFIC COSMETIC ITEMS IN THE GAME INSTEAD OF WAITING TO LEVEL UP?

Eventually you’ll get enough credits where you can just say, you know what, I’m just going to unlock that one item with the credits ‘cause my luck is bad and it isn’t popping out of the chest for me.



AH, WE THINK WE KNOW WHERE YOU’RE GOING WITH THIS... YOU CAN BUY CREDITS WITH REAL WORLD MONEY, RIGHT? ARE WE TALKING MICROTRANSACTIONS?

You can not buy credits with real world money. The only thing we’re considering selling for real world money right now is... We’ve had a lot of feedback in the Alpha that there’s a lot of desire to purchase the loot boxes themselves. That might be something we make available for purchase and it’s something we’re exploring right now. The cool thing about the system right now is that right now all of the items that exist in the system are unlocked through gameplay.

We aren’t listening to any one singular voice and a lot of people have very different opinions on things like monetisation in the game. There’s a lot of people who don’t think games should be monetised in any way – which is a little but unrealistic, [laughter] they’ve obviously not made a game.

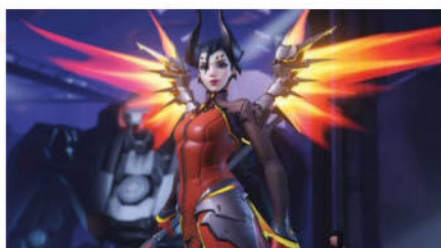
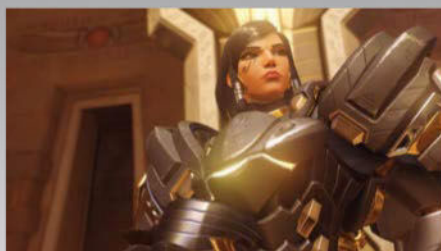
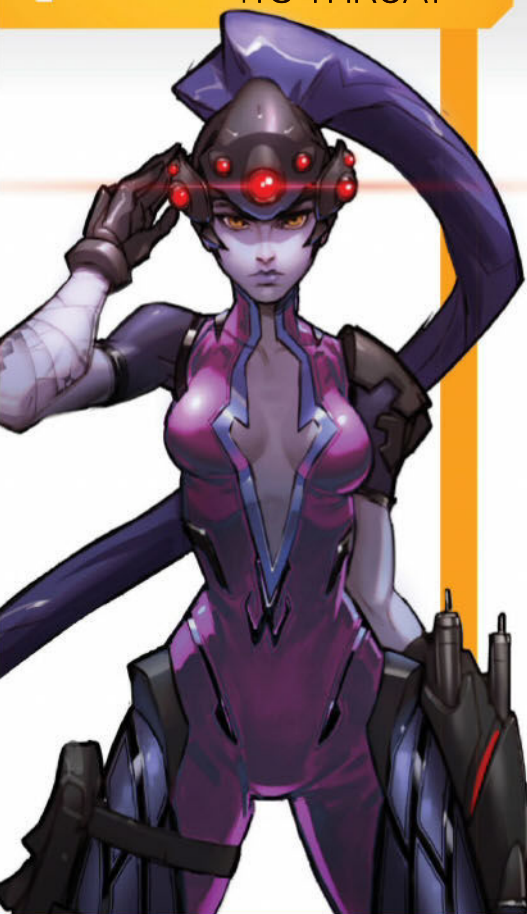
So there’s a lot of people with an extreme opinion like that, but then there’s also a lot of people who really enjoy games as a hobby and they don’t have as much time to spend as they used to, but they do have the ability to purchase things.

Sometimes they ask us, “I don’t have the time to play for 400 hours to get that Junkrat skin, is there some way you can enable me to get it a little easier?” So, you’re always doing this constant balance where you want to make sure that the game doesn’t push anybody away from it, or out of it, or offend anybody.

Overwatch handles as well with a controller as it does a mouse and keyboard, the game has been designed with both sets of players in mind from day one.



“[IT] GRABS TEAM
FORTRESS 2 BY THE
SCRUFF OF THE NECK,
AND STUFFS HEROES
OF THE STORM DOWN
ITS THROAT”



» give you a tremendous amount of freedom as to how you and your team decides which heroes to play.”

“But we like you to think about it; if I see that [one of my team mates] has picked Roadhog, well there are a lot of heroes that could compliment Roadhog in a big way. We want players to think about how they can work together to have the maximum chance for success.” Kaplan talks about the misconceptions already building in the community around certain heroes – this is a game that’s going to live or die by its post-release balancing and nerfing. He cites Bastion as a perfect example, with beta players crying wolf that “there’s only one counter” to his ballistic defensive strategies. In reality, Kaplan says, “I can think of at least nine heroes I could counter Bastion with. That doesn’t mean I’m good with all nine of those heroes... But we want there to be that freedom.”

SUPPORT HEROES WHO USE HEALING AND UTILITY ABILITIES TO AID

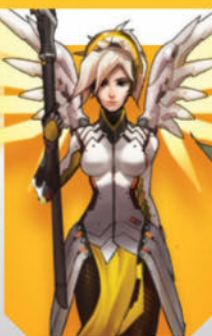


LÚCIO

DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Sonic amplifier

VANITY QUOTE
“Come on, let’s bring it together”

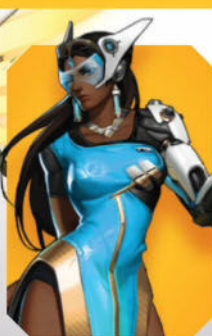


MERCY

DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Caduceus Healing/Buff Staff

VANITY QUOTE
“Heroes never die”



SYMMETRA

DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Photon Projector (DOT)

VANITY QUOTE
“The true enemy of humanity is disorder”



ZENYATTA

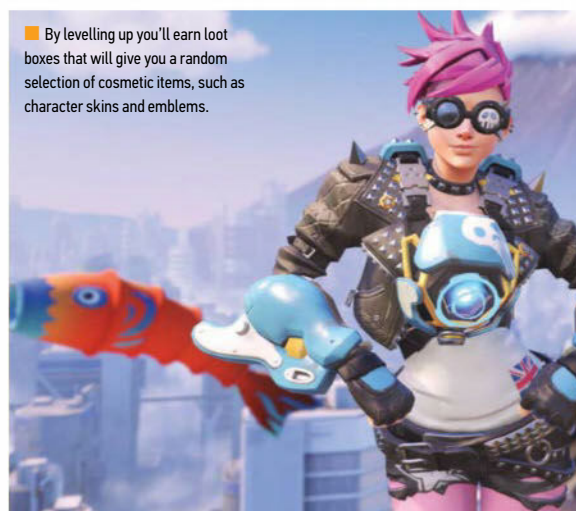
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡

WEAPON TYPE
Orb Of Destruction

VANITY QUOTE
“True self is without form”



■ By levelling up you’ll earn loot boxes that will give you a random selection of cosmetic items, such as character skins and emblems.



It’s all about experimentation. Kaplan says his personal choice to combat a skilled Bastion would be D.Va, though Scott Mercer might go with a Tracer. Getting your head around this system and concept is integral once you get in-game, because that’s where the real fun begins. Blizzard will let you switch between heroes upon respawn, to better let you combat threats in real time. “It’s about reacting to the match flow and then reacting to the other team’s composition. That’s where the real magic happens.”

It’s incredibly fun in practice. Without the fear of being locked into a new or unknown character for an entire game, like what tends to happen in traditional MOBAs after the most popular characters are swiped away, you’ll quickly feel yourself being open to risk. This is a must on game modes like Payload, where the attacking team must escort a vehicle to a delivery point, and the newest, Control, as you desperately attempt to assess your own team and the enemies’ strengths and weaknesses in the throngs of hyper-kinetic battle.

It could have been a tough ask for players, to be constantly aware of everything that’s going on. Every battle looks like a rainbow splatter of death and chaos; bullets and lasers erupt around you as western warriors, robo-apes and gun-toting grim reapers emerge from any and all angles. Fights are fast, we’ve been in some white-knuckle battles that lasted mere minutes, and others that provide the constant back and forth action you’d expect to see on the *Halo* eSports scene. Light aim assist is in effect, and it’s a



■ Loot boxes will also contain special victory and introduction poses, and they even change accordingly.



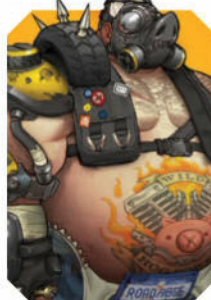
TANK SPONGES FOR ENEMY DAMAGE, DRAWING ATTENTION TO ALLOW TEAMMATES TO MOVE FREELY



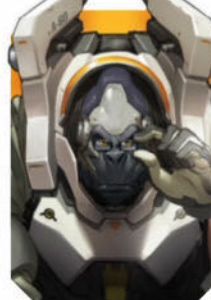
D.VA
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡
WEAPON TYPE
Fusion Cannons
VANITY QUOTE
"I play to win"



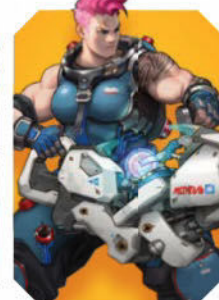
REINHARDT
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡
WEAPON TYPE
Rocket Hammer
VANITY QUOTE
"Justice will be done"



ROADHOG
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡
WEAPON TYPE
Scrap gun
VANITY QUOTE
"I'm a one-man apocalypse"



WINSTON
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡
WEAPON TYPE
Tesla cannon
VANITY QUOTE
"Imagination is the essence of discovery"



ZARYA
DIFFICULTY ⚡⚡⚡
WEAPON TYPE
Particle Cannon
VANITY QUOTE
"Together we are strong"

little more generous than PC gamers might be familiar with, though console players will feel right at home. *Overwatch* handles as tightly and comfortably with a controller in your hands, as it does a mechanical mouse and keyboard beneath your fingers. Blizzard is aiming for full 1:1 content parity with the console version – releasing in June.

THE BLIZZARD TOUCH

Kaplan mentions that the "real magic of *Overwatch*" is in its character and class systems, though we'd hasten to disagree. If anything, the magic is found in the progression system that holds it all together. A late entry to the game, the new system has been introduced to the latest Beta after months of community feedback being taken into consideration. It ultimately led to the creation and subsequent disposal of two completely unique in-house progression models, proving again how willing Blizzard is to listen to feedback.

"In *Overwatch* we wanted the progression system to not further the player's power in any way, or give you any sort of gameplay advantage over another player," says Kaplan, explaining a development task that is easier said than done. "But rather we wanted the progression system to stand as almost like a reward for your time investment... We wanted the progression system to be more of a thank you to players. Your time playing *Overwatch* means something to us and we want to make sure it means something to you too – so you get some sense of investment in it."

That meant that the two systems, one that used XP to guide individual hero levelling and another where XP earned you specific single character cosmetics, had to be forcibly removed. The *Overwatch* team was iterating to find the sweet spot, though it wasn't doing it blindly. "*Diablo* and *World Of Warcraft*, those games are heavily driven by progression; the player motivation is actually driven through the progression systems. It revolves around levelling of character, gaining a power and collection of items. But in *Overwatch*, it's a very different type of game; more akin to something like *Hearthstone*," he says. "With competitive PvP games, messing with player power as part of the progression takes away the sense or perception of fairness in the game."

The system currently running through beta promotes fairness, while also encouraging players to feel free to make big character changes mid-match without fear of stalling their momentum. Every game that you play – win or lose – earns you XP; the more you contribute in a game and the better you perform, the more XP you're likely to earn. Level up, you get gifted a loot box with four mystery items inside – and in traditional Blizzard fashion they range in rarity between common, rare, epic and legendaries. "The loot boxes have at least four items in them, and they always include a rare item; it's very similar to a *Hearthstone* pack."

The items inside? They are all cosmetic. Blizzard is offering up rewards as a thank you and they can range between Sprays, unique emblems you can spray paint anywhere on the map; Highlight Intros, custom

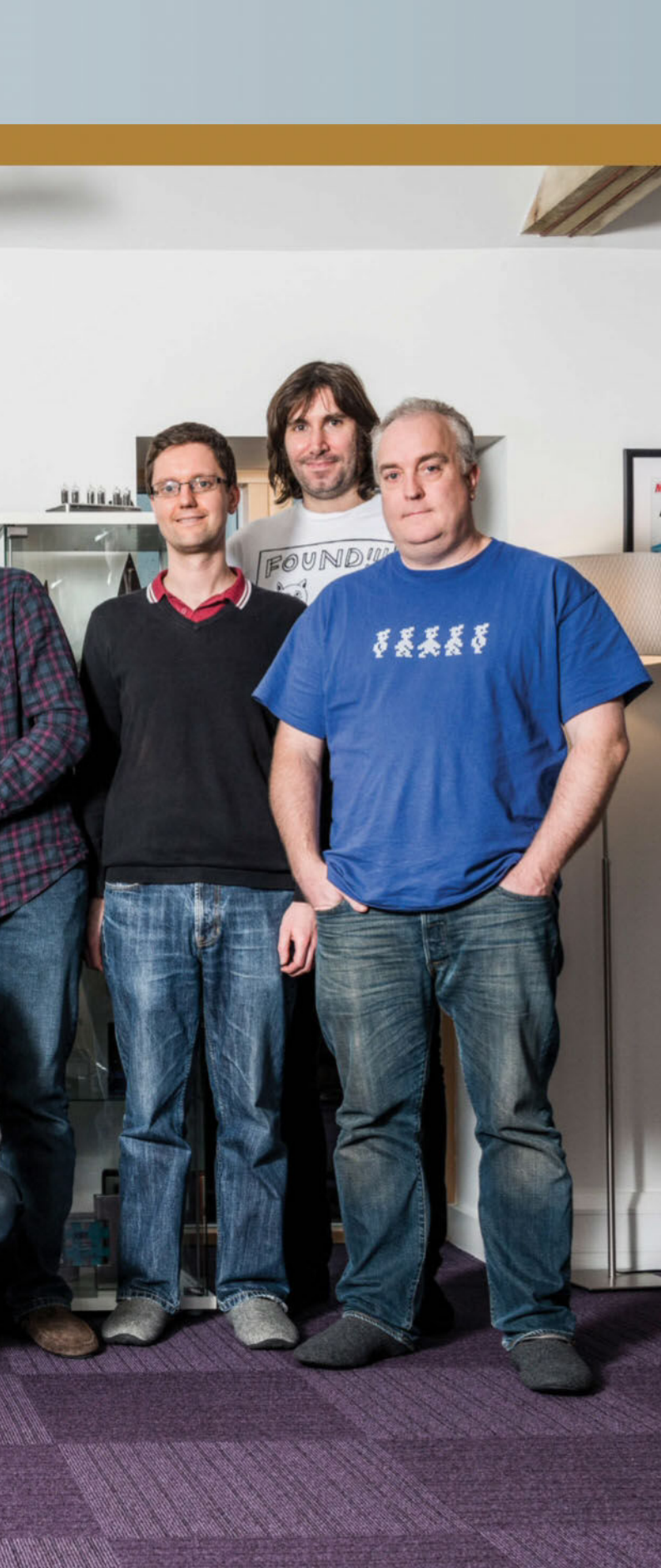
animations that introduce your hero between games; Avatars, for the social systems; Victory Poses, for your victory brag at the end; and, of course, a ridiculous variety of Player Skins.

Kaplan is excited about the potential for each of these unlockable items. We were treated to details on what the team is planning, from victory poses that riff on famous movies to punk rock skins for the coolest characters, and there's electricity in his tone when he speaks about it all. He's even excited to see player response to the 3D modelled and animated loot boxes. It's clear this is a huge victory for the *Overwatch* team; they are so enthusiastic to have a system that doesn't compromise its game. Better still, Blizzard has been able to implement this system without a hint of pay wall or 'pay-to-win' tactics: "all of the items that exist in the system are unlocked through gameplay," as it stands, no microtransaction model exists in *Overwatch*.

Essentially, *Overwatch* is doing a lot of things right. It's offering all future heroes and maps for free and it has a progression system that simply seeks to reward you for your time. There's a fun and frantic FPS game that bleeds momentum; a weird, but alluring contrast to the highly competitive gameplay and deep hero system that runs deeply through its veins. *Overwatch* is a fully-fledged console and PC release that's attempting to usher in a new era of shooters; this is for those of you that have grown loudly discontented with the current state of play. Honestly, we'd be surprised if you were disappointed.







“YOU’VE GOT TO DARE TO BE STUPID”

THE INSIDE STORY OF HOW THE FOUNDERS OF CRITERION GAMES FORMED A NEW STUDIO AND BEGAN MAKING **DAANGEROUS GOLF**

How do you explain an idea like *Daangeroous Golf* to a small team of game development veterans eager to start a new project?

“I was like, ‘I don’t know, it’s probably a bit like *Crash Mode*, but with a golf ball. But it’s probably way more out there than that, with a shitload of destruction,’” reveals Alex Ward, co-founder of Three Fields Entertainment and former chief of Criterion Games. It’s a pitch that managed to capture the imaginations of colleagues from the *Burnout* development team and beyond, but obviously it wasn’t quite so simple as that.

As we discovered sitting with the Three Fields team, including fellow ex-Criterion and Three Fields co-founder Fiona Sperry, for all that the concept of a highly explosive indoor golf game may appear to be a modest new beginning for developers of such pedigree, this new game leverages decades of combined development experience and stunning new technologies to create something that captures the kind of pure fun that made this group’s previous titles so enjoyable.

Three Fields started back in 2014 with a simple question: what happens next? “We came together and the most interesting things were the questions we arrived with, which were: ‘What would a PlayStation 5 or Xbox Next game look like, how could we start preparing for that now and how could we start to get there?’,” Paul Ross, formerly a lead programmer and then technical director at Criterion, tells us. These are ambitious questions for what was then an even smaller team to be leading, but it took them in some interesting directions. »

» "We have no idea what those machines are going to be, even if there are new machines, but as developers we're always looking at what's around that corner," adds Ward as we begin to watch some tech demos of physics simulations. More and more objects are smashed and thrown against each other, causing debris to scatter on the ground. Everything is rendered in incredible detail and fidelity, with every new polygonal shape interacting with the others. This is advanced stuff.

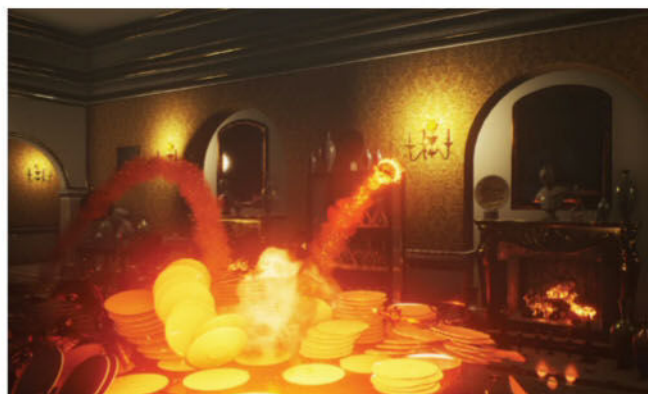
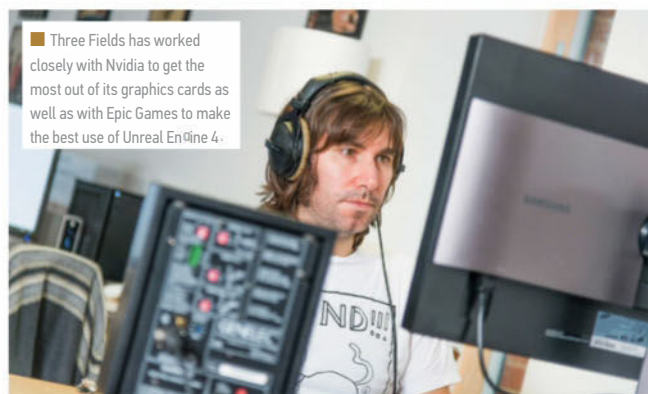
"This is a plugin for a render package – it takes days or maybe even weeks to render. We want to run a game quickly on hardware that everyone owns," explains Ross.

We then looked at some demos using liquids, which are some of the most realistic-looking we've ever encountered. These are physics models way in advance of anything any developer is putting out yet, but it's where Three Fields wanted to start. "This technology is called 'smoothed-particle hydrodynamics' and was something that NASA developed back in the 80s for averaging out quantities for when they were gazing at the stars, trying to work out how things fitted together and how they could measure something over such a long distance," Three Fields founding member and former Criterion technical director Phil

Maguire informs us. "As it turns out you can also use it to average out the quantity of pressure over a fluid, which is the important thing for working out the maths."

These were the areas this experienced team wanted to push on current generation consoles in preparation for what was to come, but it raises the question again of how this all lead to *Dangerous Golf*. "We like playing for scores, we like fast action, we like to entertain people," begins Ward. "We're not frustrated story-tellers... We were thinking whatever we're going to try and do we should do something physics-driven, that could be pretty smart."

So, we can see the path to physics and destruction, but how did golf enter into it? Ward explains how it all began to come together thanks to some newly-installed fast internet at his home and a three-month wait between leaving EA and being able to start Three Fields. "In that time I was watching Netflix and one of the first things I watched was this documentary called *The Short Game*, which is a documentary about seven-year-old golfers," he says. "I play a lot of mini golf. And the thing I like about it is trick shots. Mini golf is better than real golf because you can bang it around. When you do a wicked hole-in-one it's



really fun. It makes you feel powerful, it makes you feel special. At the same time I was also looking on YouTube at this series called Dude Perfect and it's these guys who do trick shots in various different things, basketball, archery, snooker balls, pool, everything. I'm terrible at pool because I try to do a trick shot all the time and in mini golf I normally lose, because I just can't resist it."

So when Ward gave his pitch for *Crash Mode* with a golf ball, using the highest-end physics and liquids simulations the team could muster, ideas began flying. Visual targets such as the Quicksilver scene from *X-Men: Days Of Future Past*, the explosions in the street from *Inception* or the gun battle in a bathroom from *True Lies* began to inform potential locations for the most chaos a flaming golf ball could cause. The rules of golf also quickly fell away. "There are no explosions – why not? The ball doesn't catch fire at all – why not? It's obvious," Ward exclaims. "Do they reward you for trick shots? No, because you can't do them outside on the 18th hole of Bushwood country club. It's positively discouraged. There are a lot of strict rules in golf. Whereas, we thought, if we create our own sport, it's just like *Burnout*. What's the rulebook? We don't know, but let's rip it up and start again. In *Burnout*, the more dangerously

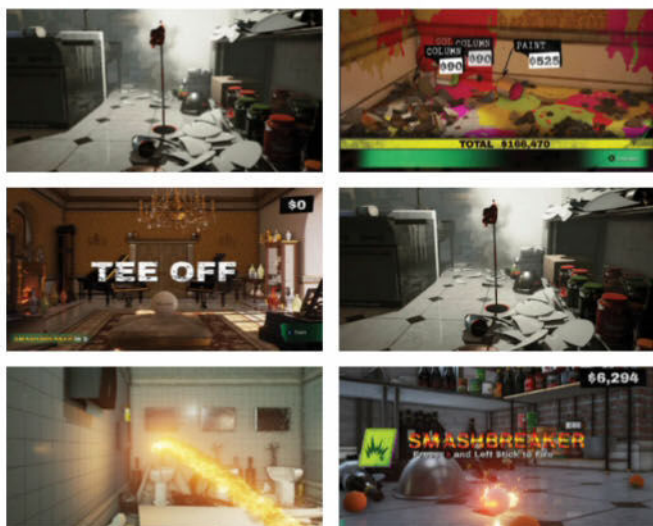
you drive, the faster you can go. In *Dangerous Golf*, the more you rip the place to pieces, bang it in the hole with an outrageous trick shot, [the more you score and then] you'll be the winner."

The other key factor was an eagerness to get moving fast. "I think Mark Cerny [lead system architect for PS4] calls it the Cerny Method: go like hell, as quickly as you can, get as much as you can playable and see if it's fun, and if it's not, stop it and do something else," Ward explains. The concern was that this small, talented team could be waiting for months for 'the right idea' rather than moving forward with a project. "That's the dirty secret of game development all around the world; in film, it's the equivalent of having the cast and crew on set and you're rolling but you haven't got a finished script," adds Sperry. "That's what happens in the games industry every day, and in big companies. Just burning money!"

What it led to was a more open mindset, akin to classic game development in the arcade era. "People would have an idea [then] and they'd make a game. We're seeing that in indies at the moment. There's a resurgence; if people have a stupid idea, they can make it," is Ward's take. "We were talking about this yesterday, about *Unfinished Swan* on PS4. I mean, the game starts on a white screen. You've got to reward anybody who's

"WE'VE GOT MASSIVE PHYSICS SIMULATIONS, NASA TECHNOLOGY FOR FLUIDS, AND ONLY FOOLS AND HORSES"

Alex Ward, co-founder, Three Fields Entertainment



■ *Dangerous Golf* encourages all sorts of peculiar behaviour, from smashing the ball against the screen when going for a putt, to landing in mop buckets in order to use them as bowling balls.

FOR THE LOVE OF DESTRUCTION

WE ASKED THREE FIELDS WHY THEY THINK DESTROYING THINGS IS SO MUCH FUN

From *Burnout* to *Black* and now *Dangerous Golf*, this team seems drawn to smashing things up and enjoying the chaos that unfolds. What's the allure? "I would say that, as a player, you can very easily see what you've done," says Three Fields and Criterion Games co-founder Alex Ward. "Cause and effect. Players like games that they're good at. You also like to be able to see 'I've done that'. Whether it's a fighting game or an exploration game, with games with destruction in them, you can clearly see what you've done. People say it's cathartic, but it's also just a very clear thing to put on the screen."

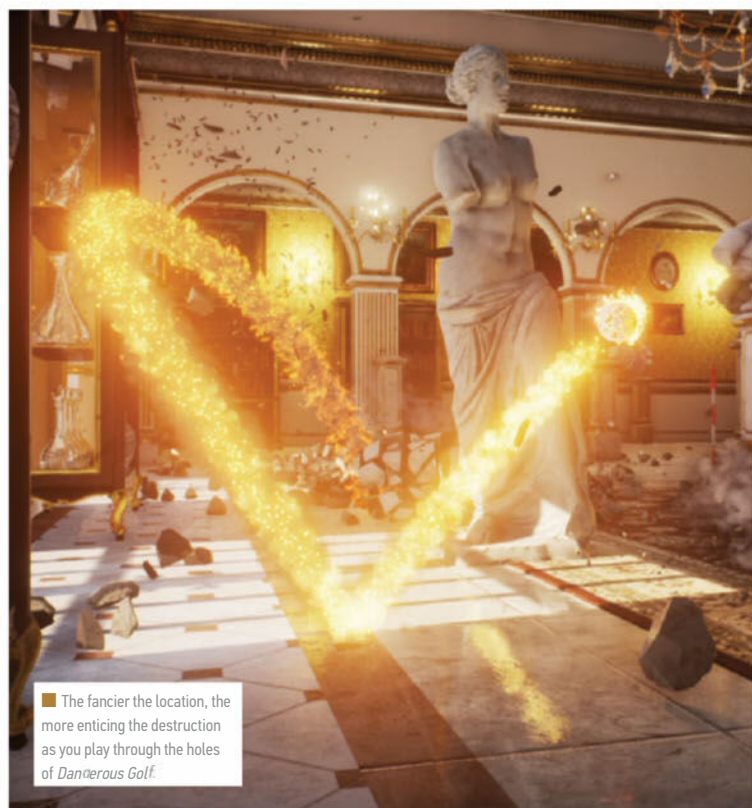
"You don't have to tidy up, that's the key thing," says former Criterion senior designer, Chris Roberts. "It's purest fantasy; you can make the biggest mess possible and not have to worry about how much it costs or tidying it up again afterwards."

"It appeals to the vandal in all of us," Ward adds.



“WE LIKE PLAYING FOR SCORES, WE LIKE FAST ACTION, WE LIKE TO ENTERTAIN PEOPLE”

Alex Ward, co-founder, Three Fields Entertainment



■ The fancier the location, the more enticing the destruction as you play through the holes of *Dangerous Golf*.

gone "You know, the game starts and it's all white..."

Three Fields Entertainment has embraced that bold, pioneering spirit of making a game that the team thinks is fun, following the humour and creative possibilities wherever they may lead and no matter how silly it may appear. "You've got to dare to be stupid," Ward says. "I come from that era where there was just this great variety of stuff. Hopefully we'll get there again, when things are cheaper and people go back to that. It's very free. It's not for everyone, and you've got to have a good team who can sit there and go 'Yeah, but will that hotdog come out of that bun while the burgers are separate? Can you make that tomato bounce? What's happening with the wheels on that mop bucket? Guess what – we've just put a mop bucket through a shop window.' 'Oh, fantastic!' 'Can we put C4 explosives in?' 'Dunno – give us half an hour!' That stuff is really quite wonderful."

Playing *Dangerous Golf* with the team it becomes clear what a winning idea it is: 'daring to be stupid' and backing it up with incredible technology and creative zeal. Playing it brings to mind the pure fun of not only *Burnout*, but also more recent fare like *Rocket League* or even *Goat Simulator*. Although it's important to point out that while everyone's favourite physics

sandbox with a goat revels in madness to a similar degree to Three Field's game, *Dangerous Golf* is built on solid, handcrafted worlds. We played a stage designed by Fiona Sperry, inspired by an episode of *Only Fools And Horses*, where we could knock down a chandelier to fall on a table piled high with plates, but the underlying design was more complex than it appeared.

"What you're seeing is a very complex light swinging, which is all physically simulated correctly, a very complex body that's then falling down on to hundreds and hundreds of destructible plates, which are all stacked correctly," says Ross. "They're all shattering in real time into thousands of pieces as you go around that room, so you're seeing more physics simulation being done than has been done in any other videogame just on that one sequence." One small error and like a failed rocket launch, the whole thing could just explode in front of you as the level begins. Setting up field after field of realistic objects for you to cause mayhem with is a far more precise endeavour than you might imagine. "We've got massive physics simulations, NASA technology for fluids and *Only Fools And Horses*. That's a videogame for you," summarises Ward.

We played through several stages of *Dangerous Golf*, becoming increasingly »

BURNOUT

Alex Ward: Don't prioritise the saving of crashes to memory cards. I don't think any of us kept crashes on a memory card ever, and it was ages and ages of work. And supporting all available steering wheels at the time on PlayStation2, which then littered the office with Logitech wheels in boxes for ages. We had to enforce a rule: 'If you want it, take it home and never bring it back to the office.' There were boxes of them everywhere.

Chris Roberts: Always test on an American NTSCV [sighs]

AW: Yeah. Always test it on American TV, which we didn't have. When we finally saw it, we weren't happy with the image quality, particularly anti-aliasing.

CR: Also, don't trigger a bus coming out of the cross-junction just before the finish line in the opening race in the game.



BURNOUT 2

Fiona Sperry: Don't change the core codebase, and just make a really good game in a short space of time. [laughs] We didn't change the whole code base for *B2*. On later projects, we did just the opposite and it caused many problems for everyone. The first three *Burnout* titles improved the core codebase each time.

AW: I think that for the time [2002] and the hardware we were working on, I think we did alright. Looking back, I'm really happy with it.

CR: Looking back, I wish we had more time to develop *Crash Mode* further than we got to and also to have shipped the Xbox and GameCube versions at the same time as the PS2 version. But we were still a small time, for the time.



BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

FS: [sighs] Ah, it shows what you can achieve in a year when you have a clear focus for the game and you're working with established technology.

CR: It shows how we took something that was negative (crashing) and turned it into something positive (aftertouch takedowns!)

AW: We all really enjoyed it, both the development and playing the final game.

FS: Happy team, happy times, happy game.

AW: I think I'm happiest with how *Takedowns* and "Play The Crash" worked out – both for the racing side and the crash side.

FS: Which actually was a theme for the rest of our games after that.

AW: Yeah. Really happy with *B3* – I still play it today on my Xbox 360.



BURNOUT REVENGE

AW: *Burnout Revenge*? If you have to re-design all of your progression between alpha and beta, do it.

FS: And if you have to cut features after the beta, do that too.

CR: It was a really difficult game to get done and we all killed ourselves to get it done in time. We went down a lot of dead ends at the start.

AW: The other learning is: don't make it all brown. [laughs] I look back and wish we hadn't chased "an ownable look" to please some folks in EA as much as we did. *B3* was a bright, sunny day and we were happy with it. But then, that's also seen by some as "a conventional art direction." Looking back, I think we got it wrong with how brown it was at times.

FS: Looking back, doing two games in the studio at the same time wasn't the right decision. And splitting the *Burnout 3* team into two just didn't work as well as it should have done.

AW: It was really popular, but I don't think it was the "Burnout 4" that we should have done, really. But people loved it and ultimately, that's what matters in the end.



THE LESSONS LEARNED AT CRITERION GAMES

THE TEAM REFLECTS ON THE KEY LEARNINGS OF THEIR GAMEOGRAPHY



BLACK

AW: The definitive answer is this – don't final your game on January 4th. We were working over Christmas to try and finish, and that just made it even harder.

FS: Don't try to final two games back to back less than a year after you've just been acquired.

AW: The team worked incredibly hard to deliver that game, and everyone felt up against it the whole time. Chris Healy's gunfire audio still stands out. And Chris Sweetman's gunfire audio still sounds great. The AI team really had a tough job trying to make it all fit into memory. Craig Sullivan pushed the level design technology as hard as it could be pushed. Remember, that this was a PlayStation 2 title. I wished we'd had just a few extra months.



BURNOUT PARADISE

AW: Not playing the game can be the game. It's got to be fun for the player to try and do whatever they want, whenever they want to do it, and be able to blend between different experiences.

FS: Also, hanging out online was more appealing to people than competitive racing – when we published the game we then knew that as a fact as opposed to just a hunch.

AW: It's fun to mess around in cars and meet up socially. It became the world's first social driving game.



NEED FOR SPEED: HOT PURSUIT

FS: Aw, I love that game. It took us a long time to get to the heart of what Autolog was – putting 'Friends' as the centre of the game, I think when we were making it, everyone thought it was just a leaderboard. And in many ways it is, but it isn't; it places you at the heart and tells you at every point how you're doing against your closest friends, who is competitively closest to you. I think it was a really good lesson of how to implement that well, because people copied us afterwards – some successfully, some less so.

AW: As an original 3DO *NFS* fan, it was important to me to get focus of the game back to being about fast cars on fast roads. I never understood, and still don't understand why *NFS* should have a story at all. I just want to drive amazing cars fast. And race with my friends. I'm playing *DriveClub* right now and that doesn't need a story. It just does a few things really well.



NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

FS: Don't go on maternity leave when you're finalising a game? [laughs]

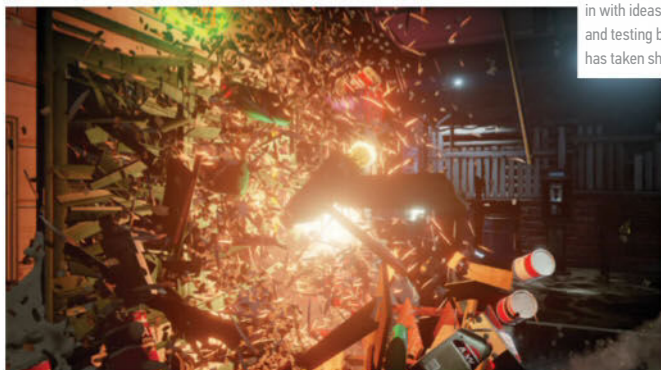
AW: Don't do "another" *Need For Speed* game, ultimately.

FS: It was one too many... We offered to do one to help out. And then before you know it, we're doing two.

AW: We were told "you can do *Underground 3* or *Most Wanted*" I was never that much of an *Underground* fan so I picked *Most Wanted* because I'd enjoyed it on Xbox 360. We spent a fair bit of time trying to pull off two big things. One was to be the first game to implement Spotify. We thought Spotify and Autolog fit well together. That would have given us specific driving challenges tied to specific songs. This could have given each car a specific theme tune for example. The *Top Gear* guys already knew this and did this really well on their programme. The second was to work with Michael Bay in Hollywood to deliver a decently-written, decently-acted and professionally-shot storyline to the game. Neither of these ideas came off in the end, for various different reasons. We also spent far too long trying to re-write the vehicle handling. Looking back, it was maybe unnecessary as I saw a lot of people struggle to master the driving in the finished game.



■ With 11 members of staff everyone has to be adept at multiple disciplines, pitching in with ideas, designing levels and testing builds as the game has taken shape.



” more impressed in each area with the level of detail and strange new twists on the already strange concept this group had managed to come up with. Holes set in a kitchen, castle, petrol station or mansion start off with a simple drive (although there's no golf club, it's important to add), typically towards something vulnerable rather than the hole.

Get a big enough score and the *Smash Breaker* is earned that, not unlike a *Crashbreaker* from *Burnout*, gives you the ability to fly around the room with aftertouch on the right analogue stick. That's where the real fun begins, of course, but it's also where some of the new tricks can be added in, such as landing in water buckets and using them as bowling balls to knock down pins or destroying everything in a room except for the giant, multi-tiered cakes and of course no landing on the floor, because it's lethal. What other game would give you bonus points for getting a hotdog down the hole?

Three Fields Entertainment and *Dangerous Golf* are labours of love for this group. It's taking risks and pushing itself hard, but there's no better time than now to be making that attempt. “I was looking back at my old work journals and talking about it with Alex, and we had actually started talking about doing this in 2007,” Sperry tells us. “There were lots of reasons why we

“THIS IS THE TIME WHEN IT CAN ALL COME TOGETHER. IT CAN MAKE YOU OR BREAK YOU”

Alex Ward, co-founder, Three Fields Entertainment

didn't do it, one of them was just that it just wasn't the right time. We'd had a really successful career, we didn't want to just suddenly pack that in and be a mobile developer and not really push ourselves. So the market had to be in the right place; self-publishing and digital downloads had to be possible... If you think about it, *Paradise* was EA's first downloadable title, in 2008. It wasn't really possible at that point for us to do that; the tools and technology didn't really exist for a small team like ours to compete. So in those seven years between when we were first thinking about it and when we actually did it, we couldn't believe how long it had been. A lot has changed. That was really good for our decision.”

So rather than attempt a mobile game – though *Dangerous Golf* was prototyped on a tablet for a brief time – Three Fields pursued its passion for console gaming, knowing that the landscape of self-publishing was changing. Still, the team knows that the concept for *Dangerous Golf* and the expectation from fans of their previous

games are potentially tough hurdles to overcome. “It's a big risk making a golf game. Not everyone's going to be interested,” admits Ward. “But this was the same thing we had in 2000 with *Burnout*. I mean, we were turned down by everybody trying to make that game: ‘You're not going to beat *Gran Turismo*.’ I think nine publishers turned us down flat.”

As we sat with Three Fields, *Dangerous Golf* had only been revealed 24 hours earlier, but the expected reaction of a small number of *Burnout* fans questioning why this new team wouldn't be making a spiritual successor to that franchise had emerged. “We'd love to make a game like that for those people,” Ward insists. “Hopefully we can, and hopefully we will. But you have to start somewhere, and that's what we've done. We're not at Criterion any more; we don't work for EA. We're starting off, and this is our first one. You've got to start somewhere. It's like a total reset.”

Still, for the most part, the reaction has been positive as the promise of

pure, silly, couch co-op fun from a small and committed team clears any cynicism away. “It's touching to see people wishing us well, and saying that they'll buy it, and that's good, because that means there's an audience that's responded, but I'm sure a lot of people haven't heard of us yet, don't know what it is,” says Ward. “We just have to get to that point where we can put it up on the store and people can download it, and we can see how well we can entertain them. This is, in any project, the time when it can all come together. It can make you or break you.”

Three Fields Entertainment is a venture backed by passion. Everyone here has made sacrifices and invested time and money into the endeavour knowing that the group as a whole is talented enough and driven enough to make a success of it. There's no crowdfunding, no publisher ready to pick up the pieces and no massive testing network. It's only made this group care even more about the strange game it's built together. “It is very personal, because there's no safety net,” Ward wraps up. “We've just done this because we believe in it and wanted to try it. It's the line at the end of *Field Of Dreams*; ‘If you build it, they will come’. If we don't build it, they're never going to come. We never *knew*. We talked about having our own studio and what it would be, but if we didn't have a go, we'd never know.”





DESTINY BE DAMNED

Is THE DIVISION perfectly poised to reinvent the MMO?

For the MMO to survive, first it had to die – in the traditional sense at least. It's a move inspired by a change in attitude from the console-converted; a legion of controller-equipped gamers screaming out for enhanced ways to play with their buddies scattered across the globe. The massively multiplayer online model does, after all, inspire almost cultish instances of dedication and retention amongst its followers. It's no surprise then, to see publishers only too eager to forge these experiences; maintaining an aggressive grasp over your time is desirable in an era of gaming quickly defined by spiralling development costs and player expectations.

While console gamers are finally ready to appreciate the appeal of experiences that have plagued the expendable time of PC gamers for the better part of a decade, the games themselves are struggling to maintain and deliver. Waning interest in *World Of Warcraft* has put yet another nail in the coffin of big budget, stratospheric-scale MMOs. *Destiny* may have unearthed an insatiable appetite for a game that displays genre sensibilities on a smaller, easier to parse scale – though Bungie's handling of the title has created some cause for concern as the months have passed on. *Destiny* has made it difficult to believe that publishers are ready, or even capable, of sustaining the persistent online game model on console. That makes *Tom Clancy's The Division* – in spite of its two-year delay – perfectly placed to succeed where others have failed.

Be it through coincidence or clairvoyance, *The Division* is perfectly timed to reinvent the MMO for the console generation. Whether developer Massive Entertainment will admit it or not, it's clearly learned an important lesson from the success and failures of its peers over the last three years – but that isn't to say it's doing everything right. *The Division* has some familiar problems; ones that have plagued co-op contenders and, perhaps more importantly, plenty of Ubisoft titles over the years. Can *The Division* overcome them? Well now, that's certainly a question worth thinking about. »

ONCE YOU REACH
MAX LEVEL, THERE
WILL STILL BE QUITE
A LOT OF CONTENT
TO DEAL WITH. THEN
OF COURSE FREE
UPDATES AND (PAID)
DLC WILL COME
ALONG THE WAY

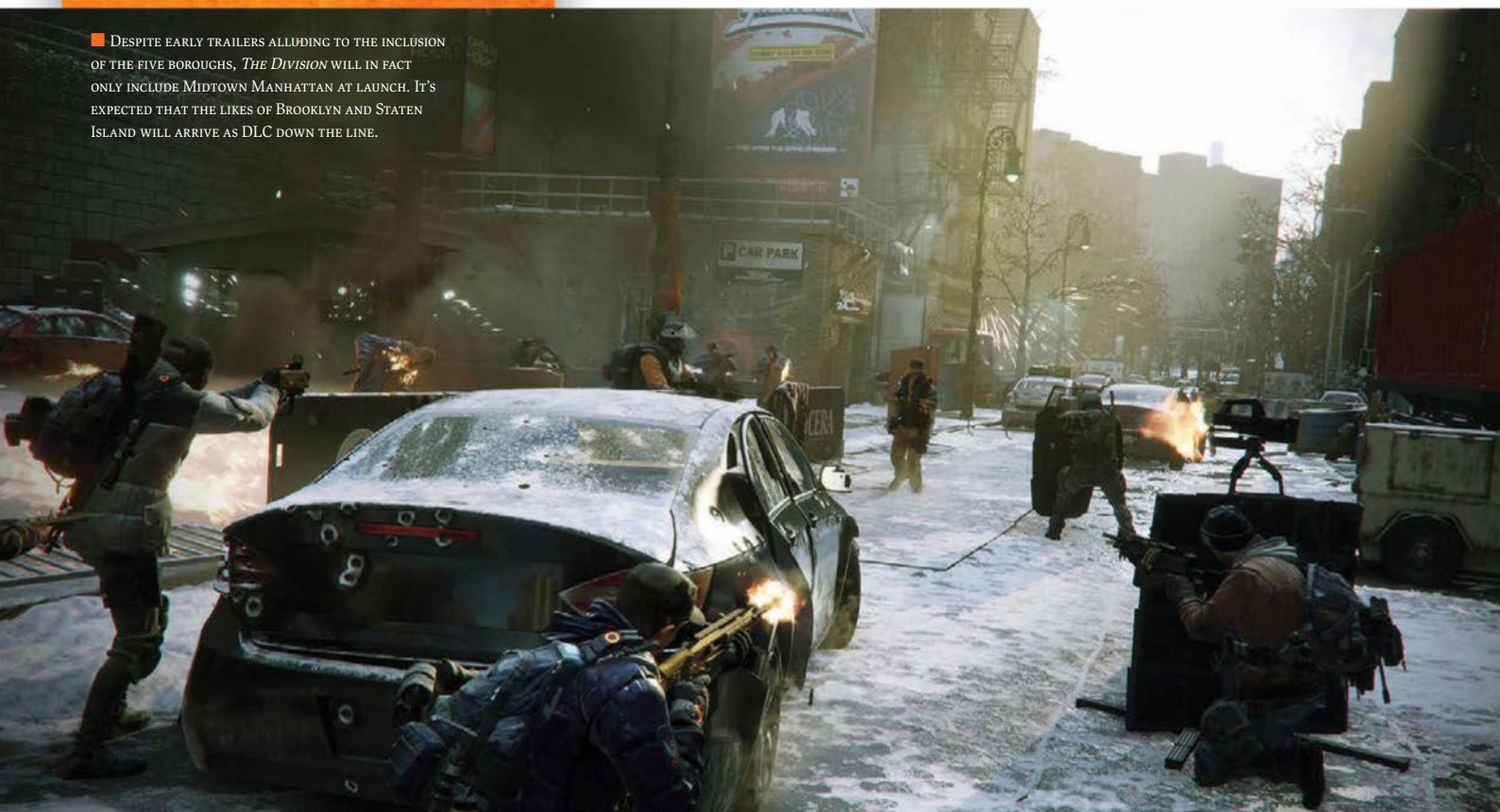
THE DARK ZONE BECKONS

Despite its inherent hostility, there's a glimpse of brilliant imagination buried deep within *The Division's* Dark Zone areas. The PvP zone found in the centre of the map can be accessed seamlessly by stepping through a door or hopping a fence, and it's offering an ambitious take on multiplayer designed to cripple friendships and forge brand new ones. In this darkened, chaotic space, you are tasked with battling tough-as-nails NPCs who may hold the greatest loot – problem is, you may also encounter other players. Emotes and proximity voice chat can only get you so far here: meeting other players is often tense, as you freely have the option of collaborating or clashing. Any player in the Dark Zone – including those in your squad – can become potential betrayers who battle it out for a bigger slice of the loot. This nightmare realm of peril will only become more dangerous once you hit level 30; the Dark Zone will re-populate with all-new content and challenges suitable for the level.

■ *THE DIVISION* SMARTLY TAKES MMO SENSIBILITIES AND SCALES THEM BACK TO APPEAL TO FANS OF SMALLER CO-OP EXPERIENCES. IN MANY WAYS, IT PRESENTS A MORE SUCCESSFUL SHARED WORLD SHOOTER THAN *DESTINY* WAS EVER ABLE TO.



■ DESPITE EARLY TRAILERS ALLUDING TO THE INCLUSION OF THE FIVE BOROUGHs, *THE DIVISION* WILL IN FACT ONLY INCLUDE MIDTOWN MANHATTAN AT LAUNCH. IT'S EXPECTED THAT THE LIKES OF BROOKLYN AND STATEN ISLAND WILL ARRIVE AS DLC DOWN THE LINE.





» FINDING THE GOOD IN THE GRIND

For those of you that have been desperately clinging onto your pre-order receipt since 2014 – sobbing inconsolably into your keyboard through every delay announcement (you know who you are) – that's probably not be a line of thought that you can necessarily get on board with. But believe us, we've played the damn thing *extensively*, and it's true, all of it. The time to walk away from *Destiny* is now; Bungie never designed its FPS to string players along for years, but the lack of transparency over upcoming content and general updates has clearly taken its toll on a player base gradually regretting the use of their last thousand hours' worth of evenings. This is where Ubisoft's very own shoot and loot time-vampire can confidently step out of the shadows and into your hands.

That's partly down to *The Division* probably not being the game you thought it was going to be; and that's actually a good thing. Despite all of the seizure-inducing E3 presentations alluding otherwise, *The Division* has emerged as an RPG first and a shooter second. After hours spent with the game, it's clear that there are very smart and subversive systems at play; carefully designed to bring those two staple genres together around MMO sensibilities in a way you never quite imagined possible.

"Being a *Tom Clancy* game means many things to us. It means rewarding thinking; this fits very well with an RPG of course, because tactics and how you approach things are more important here than in your standard shooter. This is definitely a shooter, but tactical combat is something that's at the heart of *The Division*." That's an exhausted sounding Magnus Jansen talking. It'll have been 102 long months since Massive Entertainment last released its own new game by the time *The Division* finally launches 8 March 2016, and the



And so, as so many game have done before, it's up to us to put an end to the madness – one NPC equipped with a red health bar at a time. How will we do it? The only way games have trained us to do: with a bullet to the head. Well, quite a few bullets to the head actually, Magnus wasn't kidding when he said this was an RPG. Enemies *bleed* numbers, and it'll take persistence to get to the loot and levelling that you'll come to feverishly desire. Here is one critical area where the success of *Destiny* has really helped *The Division*, even more so than Ubisoft's relentless marketing campaign. It's made the addictive alchemy behind *The Division's* loop of hit points and hedonistic loot-chasing feel familiar, broadening the gaming vocabulary a little and allowing more players to peek into the often closed world of massively multiplayer gaming.

ABANDONING MMO CONVENTION

One of the biggest problems facing any game looking to feed off of the traditional MMO design is the way classes, skill stress and progression are handled – even more so in a game that's designed to let you play solo or co-operatively. Possessing the foresight to know how you are going to handle and tackle a game that you've never played before (for the hundreds of hours ahead) is an essentially impossible task – balancing and gearing a character that's fit for duty in both scenarios is even harder. That's why *The Division* is ditching the rigid structures of the past entirely.

"*The Division* is a classless game. It is very important to me that you don't lock into a class in the beginning and build your character, because you have no idea what the classes do, what the game is and what you might end up liking, says Jansen. "And even worse, in a co-operative game like ours, you find yourself wanting to join a group but they already have a class that you have – it is not acceptable. It's a classless game, and you can change all these things on the fly; even in the middle of combat and that's incredibly important."

"The idea behind this decision is that we want players to try out different tactical approaches to combat and then pick the ones they prefer," echoes Gerighty. "We also want to give them the chance to change their play style on the go, if they are alone, or to adapt it to their co-op team mates if they decide to group up with others."

It brings a sense of fluidity to *The Division* that really could work in its favour. It gives players the opportunity to pick skills and talents that attribute well to solo play, as well as the same chance to specialise while in a group tackling some of the more difficult quests and bullet-sponge bosses. This is important, not only for bringing freedom to an area of design that's usually forcibly locked down by necessity, but to encourage players to explore and experiment with the surprisingly robust game tools.

This freedom filters down into all of *The Division's* combat-focused systems. This is also where the RPG elements »

■ SOME PLAYERS WON'T BELIEVE US UNTIL THEY PLAY: THAT'S WHEN THEY'LL SEE HOW DEEP THOSE RPG MECHANICS ARE ■



■ THE CLASSLESS DESIGN WORKS WONDERS HERE, ENSURING YOU CAN QUICKLY SWITCH UP YOUR TACTICS ON THE FLY AND RE-SPEC YOURSELF FOR CO-OP AND SOLO PLAY.

creative director is clearly eager to finally pull back the curtain after years of ambiguity.

And with the game now content complete, we can finally understand what it is we'll actually be doing in *The Division*. For starters, it has you traipsing around what associate creative director Julian Gerighty describes excitedly as "an almost 1:1 recreation of Midtown New York." In fact, as he goes on to tell us, "this is one of the most accurate recreations of the city ever done in a videogame... if you're familiar with [the] landmarks, you'll be able to find them."

You'll be exploring this beautifully crafted recreation solo or with up to three other friends by your side; co-op compatriots all eager to take back mid-crisis NYC after a biochemical attack. Black Friday shoppers that were solely concerned about getting hold of a killer holiday deal are now barricaded inside their homes hoping they aren't killed before Christmas. The millions of New Yorkers trapped in the quarantine zone are afraid. Not only of the highly contagious smallpox virus floating around on dollar bills, but of the streets themselves. They have sprung to life with the sound of wanton destruction; rioters, the disillusioned, criminals and secret factions not even games™ were allowed to see are out there causing chaos. The further north you push through the city, the more dangerous it becomes.

» really begin to rear their head outside of number-crunching firefights and enthusiastically chasing random loot drops. "We insisted quite a lot on the fact that our game was a real RPG, not a shooter with some light RPG elements, since the very beginning," says Gerighty. "I believe some players won't believe us until they play: that's when they'll see how deep those RPG mechanics are."

Admittedly, we didn't believe Massive before we played it either. After all, talk is cheap in this industry. But it's clear to us now: since *The Division* is set in a real-world space, one that doesn't respect traditional game design fantasy, everything needed to be adaptable, and it is. Characters can swap between two fully upgradeable primary weapons – in addition to a sidearm – at any time. The upgrade and progression systems are extensive – offering three separate categories of both passive and active abilities split between skills, talents and perks. They are easily changeable too, even while in combat. All of these design decisions allow *The Division's* action to maintain momentum, and it's that much more gratifying as a result. This subtle blending of fantasy and fiction feels like foreign territory in a Tom Clancy-branded world, but lord knows it sure is fun to play when it's in our hands.

BUILDING A BETTER SHARED WORLD

As Ubisoft has clearly learned after years of peddling mundane *Assassin's Creed* games, having an impressive open world isn't enough anymore – not alone, anyway. Massive Entertainment has really impressed in this respect; the 1:1 recreation of Midtown New York isn't a hollow facade; set dressing to be climbed or torn down, it's an intrinsic part of the moment-to-moment experience. The atmosphere is incredible. You'll have no problem believing a harsh and endless winter, tinged with death and decay, has rolled through the towering concrete jungle. One early mission saw us storming an analogue of Madison Square Garden – now a field hospital – and it sees you work up from an open-ground firefight on court to a canteen ripe for intricate flanking manoeuvres and waist-high cover shootouts. The contrast between the lifeless light of the outside world and the powercut-fed darkness of the inside areas is staggering – the Snowdrop Engine on Xbox One is delivering some rather impressive results.

What's really stuck with us is that between the dwarfing and imposing high-rises, the complex indoor environments, dank subway systems and PvP enabled Dark Zone, the space is entirely seamless. There's some next generation magic at play here server-side. Not only will you not experience any



■ THE GUNPLAY WILL LIKELY SURPRISE TOM CLANCY FANS; IT'S SPONGY AND REWARDS PERSISTENCE INSTEAD OF A STEADY HAND. *THE DIVISION* IS AN RPG FIRST, AND ENEMIES WILL NEED HALF A CLIP'S WORTH OF SHOTS TO BE TAKEN DOWN.

loading screens between areas, you'll also never bare witness to any matchmaking. While Bungie's early marketing material for *Destiny* may have played up an expansive seamless space, it ultimately failed to deliver.

Massive has picked its battles well in terms of shared world design. There are social hubs to found in between the 15 districts that make up Midtown Manhattan where you can meet up and interact with other players – grouping is as easy as a press the right analogue stick. Once you leave these spaces, however, you are instanced into a version of the party leader's (or your own, should you be running solo) world. You're always free to wander off from the pack; tackling emergent events in the streets or starting side-missions for credits, loot and crafting materials. The augmented reality



■ UBISOFT IS KNOWN FOR RE-CREATING FAMOUS LOCALES, THOUGH ITS 1:1 RECONSTRUCTION OF NEW YORK IS PERHAPS ITS MOST IMPRESSIVE. IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO GET LOST IN THE SUFFOCATING ATMOSPHERE OF THE CONCRETE JUNGLE.

HAS THERE BEEN A GRAPHICAL DOWNGRADE?

The Division hasn't even launched yet and it's already been hit by a wave of controversy. It seems most fitting to dive straight into the issue the Internet (however erroneously) has deemed the most important. Following in the footsteps of other recent Ubisoft games such as *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and *Watch Dogs*, *The Division* doesn't look quite as sharp or beautiful as those early trailers may have once suggested. We took this straight to creative director Julian Gerighty, though he was quick to defend it. "So far I've only heard about downgrades from the people that couldn't actually get their hands on the game. Once you get the chance to play you can see that there are so many delightful little details from a graphical point of view... we'll see what players say after the closed beta."

We don't have to wait, we can tell you right now. Put the early trailers for *The Division* directly alongside the Xbox One version – the only one we've been given the opportunity to play – and it doesn't look even slightly comparable. The detail is noticeably lessened, the textures muddier and the lighting not nearly as impressive as those Snowdrop Engine promos alluded. That said, you'll quickly forget all about those trailers while playing and become entirely enveloped in the game's stunning atmosphere. Should Ubisoft have been more honest about its graphical expectations? Of course. Should a few work-in-progress trailers and pre-release politics sully your fun with what is an otherwise great-looking game? Well now, that's up to you entirely.



map displays the location and active waypoints of your group around your feet in an instant too – every social aspect of *The Division* has been streamlined for ease of use. It's worth noting though, that while you're free to wander off on your own, *The Division* scales enemy encounters (and subsequently mission difficulty) to the number of players in your party.

Interestingly, despite being placed in an instanced version of a world, the servers are always keeping track of your progress to bring a sense of online persistence and agency to the experience. Tackle a main mission on a friends' sever and all of the progress and loot you pick up will carry back with you to your own game. This is represented in the central Base of Operations, a space that only you can access that reflects your personal progression – it's something we have rarely seen possible in MMO experiences.

"The Base of Operations gives you a physical representation of you taking back New York," says Jansen. "Where you go in the world, which missions you decide to do and in what order will decide how many resources you get, and that will decide what you invest in and what you can upgrade. The Base of Operations, when upgraded, unlocks new skills, new skill mods, new abilities and new tools," he continues. "People start coming in, lights come on, trash gets taken away, and you see physically how you take back New York. You could never do that in a normal online game where everything is shared; it's [usually] just groundhog day, because nothing you do ever has an effect."

■ YOU COULD NEVER DO THIS IN A NORMAL ONLINE GAME; IT'S [USUALLY] JUST GROUNDHOG DAY, BECAUSE NOTHING YOU EVER DO EVER HAS AN EFFECT ■



■ DESPITE ITS HEAVY RELIANCE ON CO-OP, *THE DIVISION* WILL NOT FEATURE PLAYER TRADING AT LAUNCH; AN ODD DESIGN DECISION WITH ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

In many ways, this is a strange inverse of the typical, Ubisoft template we've seen in its open-world experiences to date. Instead of a space being slowly unlocked and won over, this space reflects your own victories, failures and decisions. It helps bring a sense of cohesion to the world and narrative that you just won't find in any of *The Division's* peers. In the Base, you'll find three separate wings – Tech, Medical and Security – and completing missions for the people in charge of each helps you unlock new options down the sprawling skill trees for your character, not to mention more flat campaign missions to indulge in too.

This setup makes the divide between solo and co-op play feel smaller, less drastic. *The Division* is subtly encouraging players to play in groups because it has removed the biggest obstacles; personal impact and investment in the wider world and narrative. When fighting, exploring or completing missions, you'll never have the fear that you're wasting time helping somebody else save New York, when you should be saving your own version of it. Everything you do is tied back to your personal progression as you push towards the current level cap of 30 – loot is even dolled out to players individually as to avoid the inevitable *World Of Warcraft*-style dice-roll discussions (AKA: blood-boiling arguments). Where *Destiny* had a tendency to feel like a co-op game with social hubs tackled on as an afterthought, *The Division* feels like a fully fledged MMO appropriately scaled back and tailored to the console market and the desires of its players.

CAN IT AVOID FAMILIAR PROBLEMS?

It's incredibly impressive how true Massive Entertainment has been able to stick to its original vision. The co-op and online

systems are well built and integrated into a staggering cityscape; the spongy third-person action will take some getting used to, but the gunplay is mechanically solid. The RPG tools are complex and layered, and will certainly surprise even the most cynical players. So, what's the problem? The problem is the publisher.

As Ubisoft has recently displayed with its continued mishandling of *Rainbow Six: Siege*, the current

hierarchy doesn't seem appropriately equipped to deal with and maintain an always-online game – let alone one set in a constantly evolving and engaged space. *Siege's* player-hostile microtransaction layers, not to mention problematic (veering on disastrous) netcode fiasco leaving many unable to connect to games has us worried that *The Division* will struggle to function as intended.


Worse still, Ubisoft is already mimicking Bungie's biggest failing – a lack of transparency. One reason *Destiny* is facing such a colossal turn of disinterest following hot on the heels of the celebrated *The Taken King* expansion, is that players no longer know what they should (or could) look forward to. Ubisoft would be wise to come out swinging with *The Division*; outline the end-game, the content roll out and the year plan. Blizzard has always done a great job of communicating its schedule to players with *WOW*, so much so that millions feel comfortable jumping back in for another expansion every two years – players gaming safely in the knowledge that a constant stream of free dungeons and raid wings will continue to release to gradually push the story and loot obsession along. All we know about *The Division's* »



■ WHILE *THE DIVISION* DOESN'T LOOK QUITE AS GOOD AS WE EXPECTED, IT IS STILL STUNNING. THE WEATHER AND LIGHTING EFFECTS AT NIGHT IMPRESS IN PARTICULAR.

» level 30 content is that we shouldn't "expect any credit rolls at the end... there won't be any," Gerighty teases. "Once you reach max level, there will still be quite a lot of content to deal with. Then of course free updates and [paid] DLC will come along the way." But he stops short of confirming what that will be exactly.

Free 'updates' in an MMO shouldn't be viewed as treats for players; they are integral elements of the core game the publisher is selling. The season pass content – containing three expansions – has already been revealed as non-essential. The first opens up a new area, a tough pill to swallow considering all content outside of Midtown Manhattan has already been sliced out of the base game; the second turns the entire map into a Dark Zone for a hardcore multiplayer experience, which sounds like a chaotic hell-on-earth situation for the PvP adverse; while the third has yet to be detailed. So instead we – as regular *Destiny* players – find ourselves asking an all too familiar question; where is the end-game content, *what is* the end-game content, and how (if they are even present in the game) are raids and level 30 missions going to be handled?

It's truly wonderful to see the MMO reborn. The *World Of Warcraft* bubble had to burst eventually, and we're seeing the evolution of co-operative play in the likes of *Destiny* and now *The Division*. It feels truly awe-inspiring to tread around snowy, depreciated New York streets. The RPG systems are robust and intuitive, designed to work in tandem with established third-person shooter sensibilities. Ubisoft's application of a persistent shared-world space with instanced zoning is impressive, to say the least, as is the ability to leap effortlessly between co-op and solo play without barriers. What we need to see now is whether Ubisoft is prepared to support *The Division* in the way it needs to be supported to hold player attention and interest in the years – not months – to come. Season passes and celebrating 'free updates' is console language that has no place in this MMO-lite world. Transparency is key, as is servicing players and not the coffers. Ubisoft has already surprised by making *The Division* surpass our lofty expectations, and now it's simply time for us to wait and see whether it has what it takes to succeed where so many others have failed: with the long game. 

■ YOU'RE ALWAYS CONCERNED IN THAT SORT OF SITUATION ABOUT THE FEAR AND HOW THAT CAN SPREAD QUICKER THAN THE VIRUS CAN ■



SEPARATING THE FACTS FROM FICTION



The CDC clue us in to how prepared the USA is to fight back a bioterrorism attack as witnessed in *The Division*



The *Tom Clancy* brand is synonymous with realism; blurring the lines between fact and fiction. But with *The Division* abandoning realistic gunplay and weapons in favour of intricate gun mods, loot drops and enemies that can withstand a hell of a lot punishment, we turn towards the story to find the ghost of Tom Clancy living on. So we checked in with the Centre for Disease Control in the United States to see how plausible *The Division's* terrifying winter doomsday scenario is and, more importantly, how prepared the country is to stop it.

What is your role at the CDC?

My name is Matt Biggerstaff and I'm an epidemiologist at the influenza division at the Centre for Disease Control in the United States. As part of my job I do a lot of modelling some of our interventions we have against flu-like influenza virals and vaccinations – and seeing what the benefits of that could be during a pandemic or some sort of influenza outbreak in the United States. I also do some work helping to co-ordinate influenza forecasting, what the flu season might look like and what the next three or four weeks of flu activity might be. It's fun though, every day is different – flu always keeps you guessing! It's like having a new job every four or five months.

Does *The Division* paint a realistic scenario – a viral outbreak in New York City on Black Friday?

When you are thinking about these intentional releases in places where a lot of people gather – where there are a lot of people within six feet of one another and communicating, talking, coughing – those are types of situations that you would be concerned about if you were worried about someone releasing an agent in the population.

Would an outbreak in such a densely populated city during the holiday season be considered a worst-case scenario for the CDC?

When we think about flu pandemics, the vaccines are usually not going to be available to you on day one, because a new flu pandemic takes some time to make the vaccine and deliver it to the people that can administer it to the population. We think about ways we can slow the virus down, and a lot of those rely on closing schools, cancelling mass gatherings (such as football or baseball tournaments) and limiting the interactions in the workplace. We think about those areas where you have a lot of people together as a place where we can try and slow the spread by reducing the contacts of people. Those densely populated cities kind of promote this. A lot of people everyday are on the subway; really close to each other.

We would need to think about those numbers to find a way to slow the pandemic.

How prepared is the CDC for dealing with potential outbreaks and pandemics?

We are always doing exercises and practising flu epidemics every year. We continuously do modelling, and thinking about how quickly we could get vaccines and treatments out. There's always some uncertainty when you don't know... man-made is a different situation in a way [to natural flu outbreaks] because the virus could be engineered to not be responsive to any medical treatments we might have. Or maybe we've never made a vaccine against it before. There are always unknown situations that you can't be prepared for, but all the time we are making sure that we can respond to flu outbreaks and pandemics with the best times that we have available to us.



How do you feel about videogames covering aspects like bioterrorism? Do you think it could cause unnecessary panic? Or can people separate fact from fiction?

I think in ways it can be educational, like in that movie *Contagion* – I think that really helped put what public health does in situations like that kind of on the map. Sometimes these games let people who don't really understand what the CDC does – or what other public health and medical officials do – get to see a tangible example of what we deal with. And you hope it isn't a situation that's so outlandish that it creates a fear for something with such a remote chance of being a reality. You really shouldn't be concerned about these situations, because at least you know that there are people out there training and working to make sure the public stays safe in outbreak situations.

Is a virus spreading on bank notes feasible, is it something that could happen? And how do you combat it?

It could happen, but it's definitely not the [only] way it would usually transmit. There is some evidence that if someone sneezes on their hand and touches a doorknob,

and then someone else touched it they could get the flu too. So it's definitely possible, but it is not the most likely – for flu, it wouldn't be the best way to transmit it to people.

It would be hard to say don't touch money. People all over the country, not just New York, would think the money is bad. It's a hard message; people have to use it to buy food and buy essentials, so you would have to tailor it – it would take some time to get right.

What would the first step response be in the initial three to four days?

First we would focus on communication. Making sure the public knew what we knew and in as close to real time as possible. I think you're always concerned in that sort of situation about the fear and how that can spread quicker than the virus. In the game, society is starting to unhinge within three or four days, and that's one thing we would focus on immediately; making sure the public knew what we were doing to try and keep the country and the world prepared in this situation.

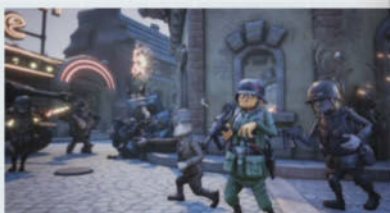
We would also focus on identifying the agent, on what was making the people sick. That would be priority one. You can't design effective vaccines or medicines until you know what's making people sick. And finally we would think of ways to try and contain the virus or to find areas that are containable. If it transmits in a way where you can identify it, and people aren't already sick and transmitting it to others before they show symptoms, we could try to keep it in as close to a specific area as possible. We would look at the transportation networks and see if there's a way we could slow it down that way.

If you were on the ground at the beginning of the outbreak in *The Division*: what advice would you give to concerned citizens?

I think first, I'd always say check with your local state health official about what you should be doing, because this is going to be a very localised outbreak (at least initially) so you don't want them listening to what people in New York are being told to do if they live in Oregon, or a state really far away. Always check with state and local health officials to see what advice they are giving people in your area.

Number one would be don't panic. Things are in flux right now, we don't really understand... but stay calm and don't change your routine, unless you've been advised by your local health official not to go into work or something. Try to treat as business as usual.

Be patient. Nothing today is the same as early yesterday, but we are investigating. We are working day and night, 24 hours, trying to figure out what is causing this virus and what we can do to prevent it. As soon as we find anything out, what's causing it and what we can do to stop it... don't panic, we're working as hard as we can. Stay vigilant and listen to your local state official.



IS YOUR PC VR READY?

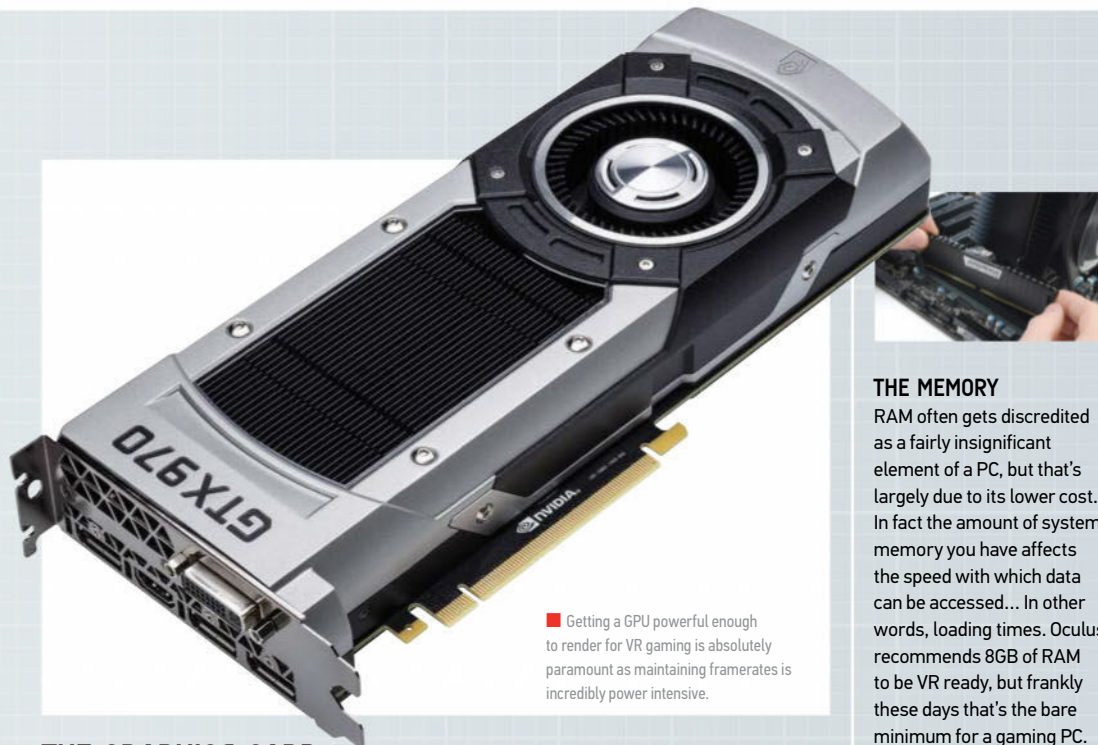
2016 IS SET TO BE THE YEAR OF VR – FOR VIDEOGAMES – AND IF YOU WANT TO RIDE THE HYPE WAVE YOU NEED TO BE READY.



It's hard to believe that it's nearly been four years since Oculus first launched its Kickstarter, the phenomenon that heaved virtual reality out of the stigmatised dark ages thanks to the likes of VirtualBoy and into the modern day. The Kickstarter – which raised nearly \$2.5 million dollars – was an unfathomable, but uncontrollable success; perhaps, many thought, VR *can* be done. Well here we are: it's 2016 and we're awaiting not only the finalised Oculus Rift product, but a whole host of unexpected competitors. Valve and HTC have teamed up to release the Vive, Sony is looking to bring VR to PS4 with PlayStation VR and we've already seen more affordable options with the smartphone-driven Google Cardboard and Samsung Gear VR. And that's overlooking Facebook's intervention, which had enough faith in the power of virtual reality that the social network site bought out Oculus, a factor that will likely end up being the defining reason VR takes off.

It's fair to say there's excitement surrounding VR, whether that's us gamers looking to get our hands on the tech (or having already had a tease of the experience at various expos) or developers who have already been working with Oculus Rift for years. You may very well be considering the new technology yourself, but it's not quite simple as that. Have you considered the cost? The best product for you? Whether your PC is even able to handle virtual reality? It's not as simple as plugging in a headset and pretending you're in the Voyager's Holodeck, after all. It's time you did some research, but luckily that's where we come in...

Bear this in mind: your PC not only needs to be capable of rendering a 2160x1200 resolution image, but it also needs to do it at a consistent frame rate of at least 90 to match the refresh rate of a VR headset. Not to mention it needs to render these 3D environments at enough of a fidelity that your mind is not distracted, all the while taking in the multiple sensor inputs of your head movement (and perhaps hand and body movement, too) alongside the complex visual, physics-based and lighting rendering that is a typical part of videogames these days. In other words, you're going to need a machine capable of a good deal of power. You can download a piece of software from the Oculus website to find out if you're Rift-ready, but with myriad possible combinations of PC parts it can often be hard for such software to be spot-on. Here's what you need to aim for to make your PC VR ready...



■ Getting a GPU powerful enough to render for VR gaming is absolutely paramount as maintaining framerates is incredibly power intensive.

THE GRAPHICS CARD

Easily the most significant part of the process, the graphics card – or GPU – will need to be capable of rendering quite intensive visuals at a resolution of 2160x1200, at a steady 90 FPS and with a wide field of view. Oculus recommends the NVidia GTX 970 or the AMD R9 290, but what, exactly, does that mean? Taking the hardware specifications of both of these cards we can assume a minimum number for various important aspects of graphics cards:

■ **4GB GPU Memory:** While experts will tell you this isn't the only significant number when it comes to buying a graphics card – and they'd be right – in layman's terms it's a handy reference point. Both these cards come with 4GB of memory, meaning that should be the lowest you can go; the step up to 6 or 8GB will be much more costly, but if you can afford it we'd recommend you do.

■ **3840x2160 Maximum Resolution:** Some GPUs will advertise a maximum resolution, and in that sense you'll want to find a card that is 4k ready (most manufacturers will advertise this as a central feature). The R9 290 is weakest in this aspect, but remember you're not *actually* targeting 4k – this just means your card will have the clout to ably run in a VR environment.

■ **224GB/Sec Memory Bandwidth:** This is a little more technical than most GPU buyers may be able to handle, but a card's bandwidth affects the amount of data it can process at any one time. In this case we'll take the GTX 970's speed of 224GB/sec as the minimum you should be aiming for.

■ **Number Of Cores/Streams:** First off, CUDA cores (NVidia) and processing streams (AMD) are essentially the same thing. This number is the amount of individual processors that can handle information, and the more a card has the more efficient it is at dealing with graphical rendering. In this case the GTX 970 gives us an estimate to aim for with 1664 cores.

■ **Base Clock Speed:** This number is the speed at which each core (or stream) is capable of running, and can be altered through overclocking to run quicker. For this take the lower number of the R9 290's 947MHz as the minimum you should be aiming for, though in truth any high-end card will top this anyway.

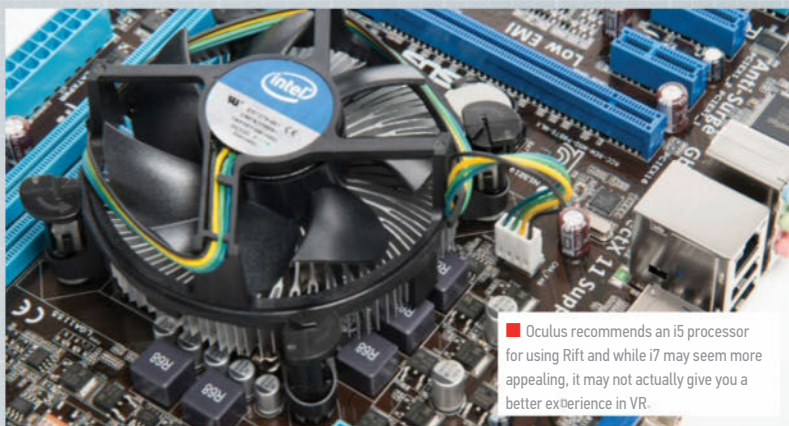
THE MEMORY

RAM often gets discredited as a fairly insignificant element of a PC, but that's largely due to its lower cost. In fact the amount of system memory you have affects the speed with which data can be accessed... In other words, loading times. Oculus recommends 8GB of RAM to be VR ready, but frankly these days that's the bare minimum for a gaming PC. The cost difference between 8GB and 16GB isn't all that vast, so it might be better to shell out for a bigger stack of RAM now rather than upgrading later down the line.



THE CONNECTIONS

It might sound obvious, but Oculus has been very specific about the demands it needs for VR connections. On the visual side you'll need a HDMI 1.3 output connection, which practically every high-end GPU will have anyway. Additionally Oculus says you'll need three USB 3.0 ports and one USB 2.0 port; don't panic too much, USB ports are backwards compatible so don't worry if you've only got 3.0 connections. What this does mean is that you will need to ensure your PC's motherboard and/or case comes with this number of connections. Again, it's likely you will have all this anyway, but it's better to be safe than sorry.



■ Oculus recommends an i5 processor for using Rift and while i7 may seem more appealing, it may not actually give you a better experience in VR.

THE PROCESSOR

The fact that Oculus is only recommending an Intel processor says everything about the state of the CPU market. All the same, the model that has been suggested – the i5 4950 – is pretty high-end, so expect it to set you back quite a bit. This will be the part that handles the computation of practically anything outside of the visual rendering, and since games are so heavily reliant on physical-based rendering systems these days it's a significant part of your machine.

■ **Quad-core CPU:** First and foremost you'll need to make sure your CPU has four cores, or individual processing chips. The majority of CPUs these days are quad-core so it shouldn't prove a challenge to find, but there are dual-cores still available and those just won't cut it. You can buy processors with six, eight and more cores, but the extra cost won't provide you with a worthwhile benefit.

■ **Clock Speed:** As with your GPU, the clock speed is the rate at which the processors on the chip run. Your minimum here is 3.3GHz, which is the base clock speed of the i5 processor. You can choose to overclock a slower CPU if you wish, but that's the target clock speed you'll need to aim for.

■ **i5 Vs i7:** Intel's current iRange of CPUs – namely i3, i5 and i7 – each come with significant increase in clock speed, but besides that, the benefit isn't vast. Gaming software doesn't make much use of quad-core processing, so spending a great deal more to switch to i7 is going to be fruitless unless you plan to edit videos or use 3D design software. If you have the money to spend, it's better put towards a faster clock speed for an i5 than the step up to i7.

THE OS

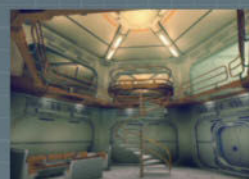
While Oculus only specifies Windows 7 64-bit or above, there are plenty of games that work with the Rift on different platforms such as Linux and even Mac OS. The fact that a 64-bit operating system was specified, however, should tell you of the age that your OS needs to be, which is to say it's any older than five years then it's probably time to upgrade to something a bit newer. Windows 10 support is, currently, sketchy.



■ Any operating system made in the last few years should serve you, although some games may have specific requirements. Anything most Windows 7 is a start.

2016'S VR GAMES

THE ONES TO WATCH



P.O.L.L.E.N.

Exploratory games are going to become ten-a-penny by the time the three major VR headsets are released, but for now the likes of *P.O.L.L.E.N.* remain novel and a great way of experiencing the technology for the first time.



THE CLIMB

Crytek is getting involved with virtual reality in a number of ways, but it's *The Climb* that excites the most. The concept is simple, but it's one experience that really only works in VR.



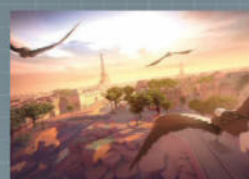
LUCKY'S TALE

An interesting title – it isn't first-person, like many other VR games. It's a *Super Mario 64*-style 3D platformer, with the perspective controlled by the movement of your VR headset.



EDGE OF NOWHERE

Insomniac's *Edge Of Nowhere* is not first-person. You control a hero as he escapes from disastrous situations, the wobble of your VR headset adds to the stress and panic.



EAGLE'S FLIGHT

Ubisoft's been surprisingly timid with VR – ordinarily the company jumps into new tech – but the idea of controlling the flight of a bird sounds if not thrilling than at least an ambient experience.



CHRONOS

Taking its cues from RPGs like *Dark Souls*, *Chronos* is one of the few games to attempt VR with a more traditional genre. It's important that virtual reality attempt such titles and this one has a very cool time mechanic.



JOB SIMULATOR

This new breed of clumsy games might have quickly worn itself thin on other platforms. The humour is more direct, and add in multiplayer and it could be more akin to a game of *Operation* than videogame.

THE OPTIONS

There's plenty of choice when it comes to becoming VR ready. You could build a brand new gaming PC from scratch, you could upgrade the hardware you currently have or you could simply buy a gaming PC built for you. While this will be more expensive than doing the work yourself, buying a PC outright is definitely an option – the premium comes from the ease, reliability and longer warranty that comes from having someone else do the work. Oculus has teamed up with a number of manufacturers to release what it is marketing as 'Oculus Ready' machines, providing you with a coupon for money off when pre-ordering the Rift headset. It's a handy option that could see you getting VR ready for the same price as building a PC yourself.



ASUS G11CD

This customisable PC is a fairly run of the mill machine, a basic – albeit decorative – case housing all the integral parts you'll need. It's said to cost from \$949 with the purchase of an Oculus Rift, but don't forget that this PC is customisable. The range of graphics cards to choose from begins with the GTX 950, a 2GB GPU that is essentially half the capabilities of the Oculus recommended GTX 970. Expect that price to increase incredibly should you come to purchase this one. Despite that, don't hope for this to be any more than an entry level machine, a no-frills Oculus Ready PC.



ROG G20CB

Asus' high-end brand ROG – or Republic Of Gamers – also has an Oculus Ready system, and again features the familiar levels of customisation as its more basic brother, the G11CD. In fact there is nothing – in terms of specification – that this PC can have that the G11CD can't, but it might be worth pricing the two up simultaneously anyway. This ROG machine has a much smaller profile – the size of machine you couldn't build yourself without a good deal of know-how. Not only that but it runs quieter, too, and has a much more elaborate and detailed design to the case. If the price difference isn't all that vast, we'd pitch for the ROG over the G11CD.



ALIENWARE X51

As with the two Asus machines, Alienware isn't actually making exclusive machines for Oculus, but you will receive a coupon for money off either of these machines if you do pre-order a headset. As such the X51 is available regardless and while it is customisable – you'll be able to increase RAM or hard drive space – the core parts are locked down. Here you're getting a GTX 970 and a 3.3GHz CPU (as is recommended), with a choice between an i5 or an i7 model. It's a simpler option than the other two with less fuss, and Alienware still manages to maintain its gamer prestige even after being bought by Dell.



CHILLBLAST FUSION KRYPTON

Though Chillblast has a wide range of VR ready machines it is not being offered as part of the Oculus coupon deal. Fret not, however, since the company usually ends up cheaper by comparison to the high-end manufacturers like Alienware anyway. There are a host of options available here, but we've gone with the Fusion Krypton, which comes at around the same cost as the Asus G11CD, but with an overclocked i5 CPU (running at 4.4GHz), 16GB RAM as standard, fits inside a mini case and even has many more customisation options – even LED lighting – if you wish to tweak it some more.

VR TIMELINE

THE FUTURE WAS HERE

1979

MIT creates the Aspen Movie Map, a 'hypermedia' system that let users walk around.

1984

Jaron Lanier founds VPL Research to prototype various VR machines.

1991

Sega announces Sega VR for arcade and Mega Drive, which was then cancelled.

1991

Virtuality is released, the first VR gaming system available to consumers. It mainly stayed within arcades.

1993

Sega claims that Sega VR will release in the autumn year and will retail at \$200, before delaying it.

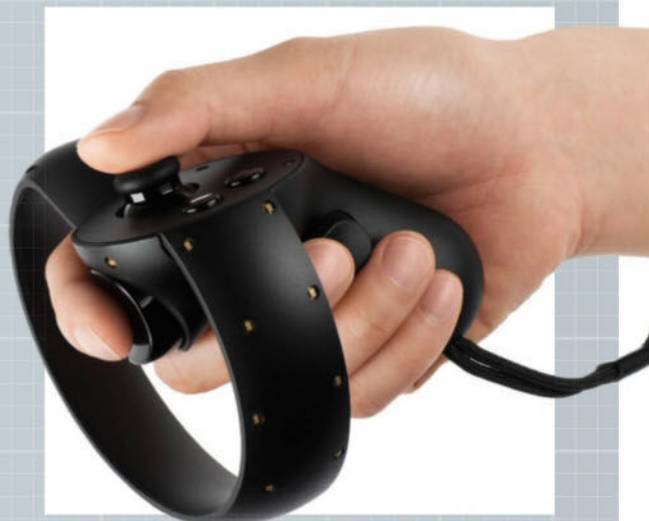
1994

Sega VR is cancelled, with it being reportedly claimed that it was "too realistic".

Since VR is all about immersing yourself into any given experience, it's perhaps unsurprising that first-person games tend to take precedence over any other for developers. As a side-effect of the popularity of virtual reality, the PC peripheral market has seen a resurgence – with many long forgotten extras suddenly becoming not only viable, but enticing. In truth the following peripherals are all added extras, but there may come a time when you want to take your VR experience further and any of these will be the way to do it.

OCULUS TOUCH

Though the Rift headset does come packaged with an Xbox One controller – since you'll need *something* to play these VR games with – the Touch accompaniment will likely end up being the next obvious upgrade. Here the two separate handheld devices have the typical controller buttons that you might expect, with the added bonus of detecting the position of your hands in 3D space. It's a clever combination of traditional gaming input that almost anyone will recognise with a more physical interaction. Exploratory, narrative-driven games – which have become increasingly popular over the last couple of years – will be enhanced as you're able to reach for objects in the real world and grasp them in the digital one. Since Oculus Touch isn't being bundled in with the Rift headset there is a risk that it could go the way of the PlayStation Move; turning it into an optional extra will limit developer's interest in coding for it, thus reinforcing the lack of consumer interest in the product. Time will tell, but there's no doubting the benefit it could have on virtual interactivity and there's sure to be early adopters in the development scene.



RACING WHEELS

As with flight sticks, racing wheels have fallen by the wayside gradually over the last decade or so. Part of that is the greater understanding of developing for console controllers, which has led to a disinterest in the clunky extras like racing wheels. All the same, there are some devout racing fans who do still favour wheels over controllers – the reasons why should be fairly obvious – and now with Oculus Rift they can draw themselves ever closer to the experience. Turning to see the apex of a corner, for example, is a natural part of a racer's job, and now with virtual reality it can be a natural part of the gaming equivalent. There's a huge range of racing wheels, however, from just the wheel, to a combination of pedals and gears and even entire rigging setups with bucket seats. Your budget will affect what you can go for, but try to at least pick a wheel with a wider turning degree.

FLIGHT STICKS

Of all the most recognisable games associated with VR, *Elite: Dangerous* and *EVE Valkyrie* are easily the two most prominent. It makes sense, too, since taking control of the cockpit of a spacecraft is perhaps the perfect use of virtual reality: your position is fixed within the spacecraft, but you're able to move via spacecraft controls and view the numerous parts of your ship simply by tilting your head. As such you may find splashing the cash on a decent flight stick would end up being money well spent. A flight stick would further remove the barriers to immersion by replicating spacecraft-like controls. Do yourself a favour if you do opt for a flight stick, however, and consider picking up one of the high-end ones with throttle control – those are especially exciting.



1995

Nintendo releases Virtual Boy, now recognised as one of Nintendo's biggest failures.

1999

Linden Lab is founded with an intention of making a complete 360 degree VR experience.

2010

Palmer Luckey creates his first prototype for what would eventually become Oculus.

2012

The Oculus Rift Kickstarter is launched, finally reaching \$2.4 million in funding.

2013

Virtuix Omni launches its Kickstarter. The treadmill-like machine works in conjunction with VR headsets.

2014

Google Cardboard, a cheaper alternative to Oculus Rift is released.

2015

HTC and Valve announce a partnership to produce the HTC Vive.

2016

Oculus Rift is released to the public, followed by PlayStation VR and HTC Vive.



20

REASONS WHY

POKÉMON

CONQUERED THE WORLD

TO CELEBRATE THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY
OF POKÉMON RED/GREEN'S RELEASE
IN JAPAN, WE REFLECT ON WHAT HAS
MADE THE FRANCHISE A SEEMINGLY
EVERGREEN PHENOMENON



CROSS MEDIA PERFECTION

01 From the beginning *Pokémon* has been a multimedia entity. It existed from the start as a game, an anime and a trading card game. Others over the years have sought to expand in this fashion, attempting to turn sales on the shelves into success on the screen, in comics, in books or elsewhere, but they're rarely triumphant. Likewise it's rare to see a show, movie or board game translate with great success to a videogame. *Pokémon* is unique among its peers by not only pulling off this spinning plate trick of existing in all its camps simultaneously, but doing so with great products too.



THE SLOW REVEAL OF SECRETS

02 Do you remember when the existence of Mewtwo was revealed? Do you recall the rumours and convoluted stratagems players concocted for how to defeat and secure him in your team? We do, and it was one of the great highlights of the original *Red/Blue* days of *Pokémon*. Since then each game has had its small gems and hidden secrets for fans to go and discover on their own. They might not be a part of the story or perhaps even officially announced as part of the game until later, but they're there. Mewtwo was the crowning example of this slow reveal of new, amazing gameplay opportunities.



BRINGING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

03 *Pokémon* has always been about playing together, but rather than wait for players to figure this out for themselves, The Pokémon Company helped to foster the community spirit of the series from the start by organising events. Around the world you would be invited to game stores and shopping malls with the promise of being given exclusive new Pokémon to add to your collection. It was an ingenious strategy as it helped to establish that this was a series that required interaction with and between fans. To get the most out of *Pokémon* you need to be out there, engaged with the community.



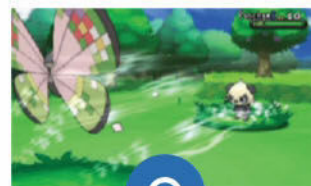
DID YOU KNOW?

GOLD AND SILVER WERE ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO BE THE FINAL *POKÉMON* GAMES IN THE SERIES. THEIR SUCCESS PROVED THE FRANCHISE HAD MORE TO GIVE.



INCENTIVISED TRADING

04 Perhaps even more important than establishing that meeting other players and trading with them was a fun thing to do and a great way of building out your Pokédex, the series has always incentivised such trading. Whether it's Pokémon that only evolve when traded or Pokémon that level up faster after being traded, the games have always given an advantage to players who are more engaged in the community side of the experience. To truly get the fullest and most fulfilling *Pokémon* experience, you had to get out there and trade. The rewards were just too good to ignore.



SIMPLE LOGIC, DEEP POSSIBILITIES

05 Break down the original *Pokémon* battle system and it wasn't really much more complex than rock, paper, scissors. However, underneath that simple conceit and ease of identification came a swathe of other info that could be used in battle. While every Pokémon had strengths and weaknesses they could also be augmented or enhanced in later games by other factors. Combinations of Pokémon in your team could be built to make your lineup more effective. From specialised squads to all-round beasts, every player could create a strategy to win and that speaks to the hidden depths of the game.



GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

06 It's a simple phrase, but it perfectly encapsulates everything that is fun and addictive about the *Pokémon* series. Would we have even dared to dream that such a feat as catching all 150 Pokémon was possible had the game not told us we had to achieve it. This slogan stated a goal and by doing so made it seem a plausible reality. Since 1996 hundreds of new Pokémon have been added to the roster and yet the demand to catch them all remains as strong as ever. It's a badge of honour, a level of commitment and post-game experience that few would have experienced before.



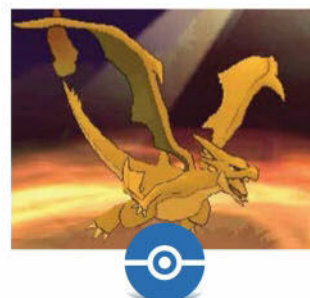
DID YOU KNOW?

THE LEGENDARY BIRD TRIO OF ARTICUNO, ZAPDOS, AND MOLTRES HAVE THE SPANISH WORDS FOR ONE, TWO AND THREE IN THEIR NAMES (UNO, DOS, TRES).



IT'S AN RPG AND A SPORT

07 The best RPGs offer tens of hours of gameplay, sometimes even hundreds of hours. *Pokémon* delivered hundreds upon hundreds. How? By having a multiplayer element that turned the solo RPG into a competitive pastime. How many other role-playing experiences out there can boast a post-game experience that can virtually last forever? What other RPG is played competitively around the world? We can't think of too many, and to have one series dominate and remain unchallenged in its field only helps to emphasise its brilliance. By making the core battle mechanic of *Pokémon* something that could be played competitively with real players, it made this game into something amazing.



IT'S ALWAYS EVOLVING

08 For a game series to remain vital and popular for 20 years it can't stand still. As much as *Pokémon* may have a reputation for repetition or for sticking with the same formula, it simply isn't the case. There's a core to the series, a spirit that remains, but mechanics, characters, Pokémon, location and themes have altered and developed over the years. With each new instalment there are new rules and variations to learn, new Pokémon to catch and new training methods to master. This series is always moving forwards and trying to improve. That's why even after all these years, hardcore fans remain committed to picking up the latest game.



EVERY POKÉMON IS UNIQUE

09 The creation process for Pokémon is a fascinating and painstaking one, and it's a big reason why every new creature that gets added to the roster stands out. First the team creates a silhouette of the new addition to the game and compares it to every other Pokémon already created to make sure it's different. Then the team starts comparing the colour palette of the potential monster against all previous creations to make sure that is unique too. If it passes these two tests then it takes a significant step closer to being added to the Pokédex of every collector in the world.



A GAME FOR ALL SEASONS

10 You can't underestimate the importance of the series being a mobile one. Every Nintendo handheld has been supported by *Pokémon* games and that means that whether at home or on the road, rain or shine, cold or hot, indoors or outdoors, *Pokémon* is always on the menu for gaming fans. Whether you're looking for a few minutes distraction or for a few hours of escapism, this game has you covered because it has the depth of gameplay and the instant accessibility that handheld games are designed for. This simple fact is one of the biggest reasons why *Pokémon* remains as vital today as ever.

DID YOU KNOW?

RHYDON WAS APPARENTLY THE FIRST OF THE POKÉMON DESIGNED FOR THE GAME. THAT'S WHY YOU'LL OFTEN SEE STATUES OF THIS PARTICULAR CREATURE.



A DRIVER OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

12 Games are ultimately a medium driven by technological advancement and while for many that tends to mean a focus on graphical fidelity, for *Pokémon* it's been something a little more external. Time and again these games have helped Nintendo to pioneer and field test new technologies, particularly those that help to foster greater connectivity. Wireless connections between Game Boys for instance or the ability to play handheld games through a console thanks to cartridge adapter. Again and again we've seen small new gadgets added to this franchise to open up new

IT'S THE ONLY CHILD-FRIENDLY ESPORT

11 Chances are you've not been to a *Pokémon* event of late, but it's really quite something. This has always been a very kid-friendly game thanks to its cute characters, but more importantly The Pokémon Company has been great about supporting all of its fans regardless of age. Older and younger players are typically separated into age groupings for competition, giving everyone a chance of competing against their peers and if they stick it out they can make their way up through the groupings as they get older. Few games offer such progression for younger players.

■ Nintendo and The Pokémon Company have gone to great lengths to ensure new generations of fans can find a place to play and compete with their game.



"FEW GAMES OFFER SUCH PROGRESSION AND OPENNESS FOR YOUNGER PLAYERS"



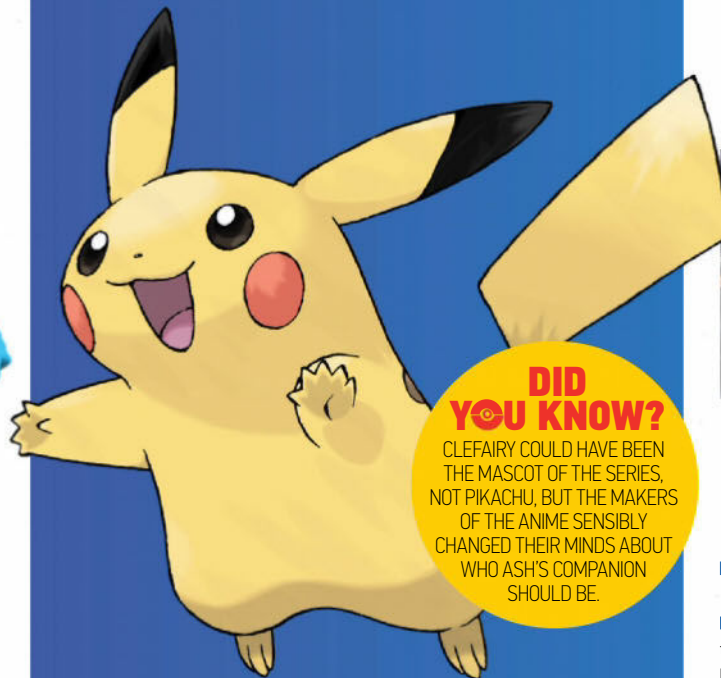
GREAT SPIN-OFFS

13 In addition to helping to foster great connectivity and maintaining a very high quality of games through the main series, the spin-offs haven't been half bad either. Maintaining the reputation of quality for a brand is tough (just ask every triple-A publisher in the business today) so having games like *Pokémon Snap* in your back catalogue is a real boon. From *Stadium* to appearances in *Smash Bros*, Pikachu and the gang have enjoyed some great extracurricular appearances. Even the recent *Pokémon Shuffle* was a horribly addictive and engaging little puzzler using the license. It all helps to keep the IP alive and current.



COPY CATS ONLY MAKE IT LOOK STRONGER

14 Given everything we've said about *Pokémon*, its simplicity, the fairly transparent way in which it develops its characters and evolves its gameplay, you would think that a competitor would have risen to the top by now. *Digimon* is perhaps the most famous of these, but do you remember Spectrobes? Even *Ni No Kuni* and *Puzzle & Dragon* have some *Pokémon* genes in them. But all these games seem to do is draw players back to the original and best version of the formula. They don't chip away at *Pokémon*'s fanbase, but solidify it. Surely that's the sign of a truly superb game series.



DID YOU KNOW?

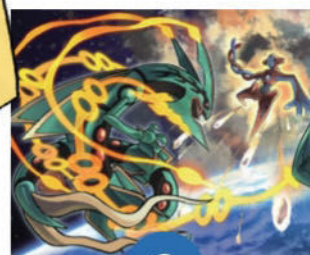
CLEFAIRY COULD HAVE BEEN THE MASCOT OF THE SERIES, NOT PIKACHU, BUT THE MAKERS OF THE ANIME SENSIBLY CHANGED THEIR MINDS ABOUT WHO ASH'S COMPANION SHOULD BE.

PIKACHU

15 Just look at the little fella. What would *Pokémon* have been without Pikachu as its mascot? The odd thing is that it's hard to pin down exactly what it is about this electric type that makes him stand out from the pack so significantly. He's not necessarily the cutest or the most powerful. He's no more charismatic, at least in the game. We like to think it's a combination of these elements. Just cute enough, just fun enough and just powerful enough to be useful. The cartoon obviously gave him a lot more personality than the game ever could, also leading to a generation of players who steadfastly refused to let Pikachu evolve in their games. Bottom line, mascots like this are lightning bolts.

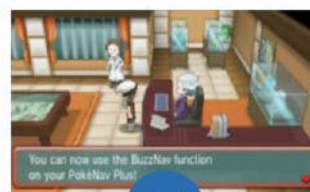


■ *Pokémon*'s electric mascot remains one of the most recognisable in the world of gaming.



STRONG ONLINE COMMUNITY

16 Back in 1996 the internet was just starting to come into its own and the community of players, fostered by events and real-world meet-ups, was looking for more and more ways to connect. From these early days web communities began to emerge and while the online world has evolved and morphed in the years since, mostly ditching chat rooms and forums in favour of Tumblr, Twitter and YouTube, the *Pokémon* community remains as strong as ever on its own fansites. Plus these players have embraced the spirit of camaraderie and sportsmanship that the game espouses, always ready to offer help and advice to players. It's often the friendliest place on



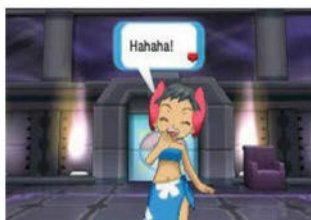
RESPECT TO ITS PLAYERS

17 Even though many still dismiss *Pokémon* as a game for kids, no one could ever accuse this series of talking down to its players that way. *Pokémon* respects its players, even when they're doing something stupid like taking on Brock with a team of electric types (what's the matter with you? The guy on the door told you to get some grass and water types). While it will advise and teach, it doesn't dictate. It won't hold your hand or block your progress. You may make the game hard for yourself, but grinding through a battle like that is an important learning experience and Game Freak has always respected that.



IT'S ALWAYS EVOLVING

18 Have you ever looked up the mathematical formula behind *Pokémon*. It's some intense stuff. From the likelihood that you'll meet certain Pokémon out in the wild to your chances of capturing them, everything in the game is based on strict and sometimes quite complex formulae. The thing is, some players devote themselves to cracking these little puzzles and in so doing open up all sorts of weird and wonderful schemes for beating the game and collecting rare Pokémon. It's a whole other level of intrigue and devotion to these titles that you rarely see in games these days, but it speaks to the hidden depth of the series that there's always something to discover.



POSITIVITY COMES FIRST

19 If we were to break down the core themes of *Pokémon*, they're always massively positive and life-affirming. It promotes sportsmanship and respect of competitors through trading, but also through its story. Rude characters in the game are always villains and get their comeuppance. What's more it also puts forward a message of respect and fair treatment of animals. Those who see it purely as a capturing game might think the opposite is true, but once again characters who treat their Pokémon poorly are always the bad guys and in later games the more your Pokémon love you, the better they fight.



THERE'S ALWAYS A NEW UNICORN

20 Twenty years is a long time to be one of the most loved and most-played games on the planet, but one of the biggest reasons for *Pokémon's* longevity is that it has been great at developing a new 'unicorn' for each game. What we mean by that is there's always a new, rare and glorious creature to find. Something so enticing and intriguing that even players who started with this series back in 1996 can't help but wonder what possibilities this new addition might bring to the game. In always offering a new, special Pokémon to hunt and always giving players an incentive to come back, these games have kept themselves vital and attractive long after most of its peers faded into history.



"ONE OF THE BIGGEST REASONS FOR POKÉMON'S LONGEVITY IS THAT IT HAS BEEN GREAT AT DEVELOPING A NEW 'UNICORN' FOR EACH GAME"

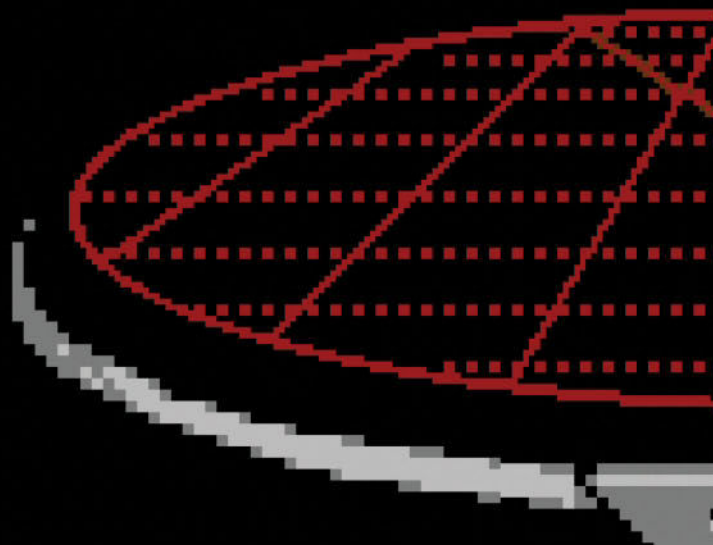
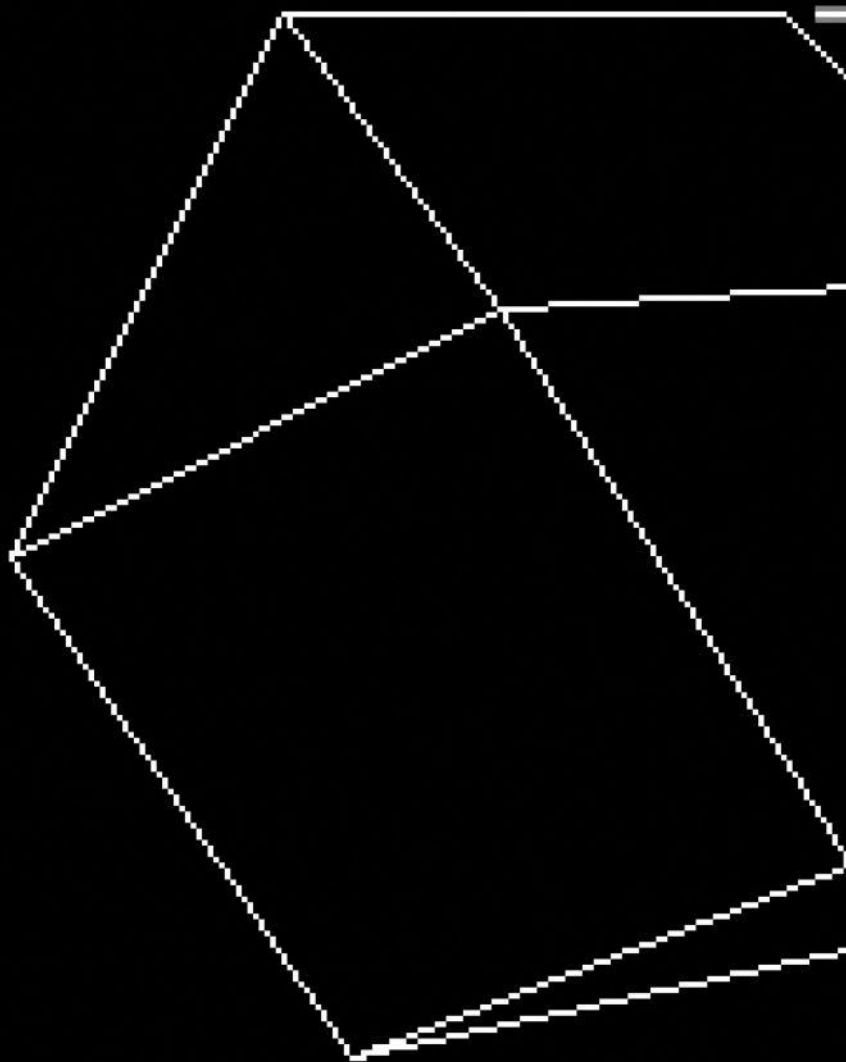
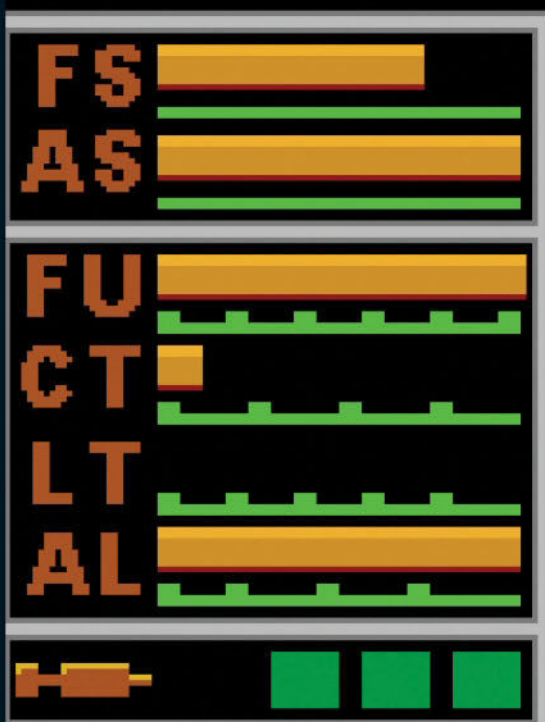
WHY I



ELITE

FRANK ARNOT, MANAGING DIRECTOR
AND FOUNDER, STORMCLOUD GAMES

66 My favourite game? That is such an impossible question to answer! Plus I'm old... I've been playing games since the Eighties, so there's a lot for me to choose from! If you are twisting my arm, I guess I'd have to go back to my youth and choose the original Elite. By today's standards, Elite's wireframe graphics seem very simplistic but for my 14-year old self, it was pure escapism. Sandbox gameplay, my own spaceship to pilot, a whole universe to explore, space battles, and a moral choice over how I made money, whether it be piracy, mining, bounty hunting or trading in legal goods or more shady contraband. It is a great example of a virtual world making you actively imagine more than it shows. An instant classic!

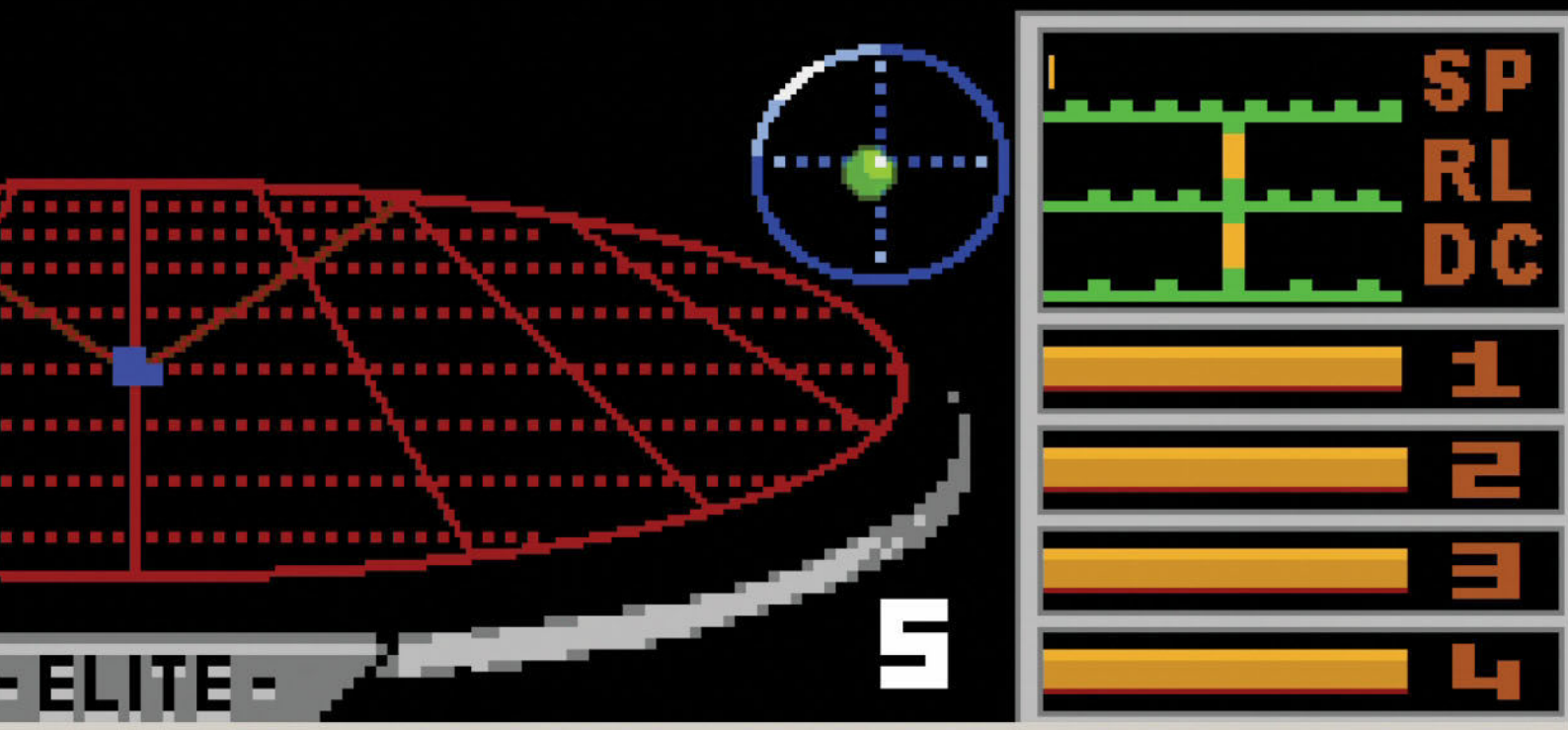




A wireframe view of a virtual world, showing a perspective view of a landscape with a road and some structures. The wireframe is composed of white lines on a black background.

“It is a great example of a virtual world making you actively imagine more than it shows. An instant classic!”

FRANK ARNOT, MANAGING DIRECTOR, STORMCLOUD GAMES



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Reviews

- 74** **XCOM 2**
PC
- 78** **Street Fighter V**
PS4, PC
- 80** **The Witness**
PS4, PC
- 82** **Lego Marvel's Avengers**
PS4, Xbox One, PC, PS3,
Xbox 360, Wii U
- 84** **Pokémon Super
Mystery Dungeon**
3DS
- 86** **Final Fantasy Explorers**
3DS
- 87** **Undertale**
PC
- 88** **Darkest Dungeon**
PC, PS4, PS Vita
- 90** **Blade & Soul**
PC
- 92** **Assassin's Creed
Chronicles: India**
Xbox One, PS4, PC
- 93** **Arslan: The Warriors
Of Legend**
PS4, Xbox One, PS3, PC
- 94** **Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo**
Xbox One, PS4, PC
- 96** **The Banner Saga**
Xbox One, PS4
- 97** **Resident Evil Zero HD**
Xbox One, PS4, Xbox 360, PS3, PC
- 98** **That Dragon, Cancer**
PC

74 XCOM 2

The tactical behemoth looks to take our alien-fighting skills to a whole new level



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.



AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



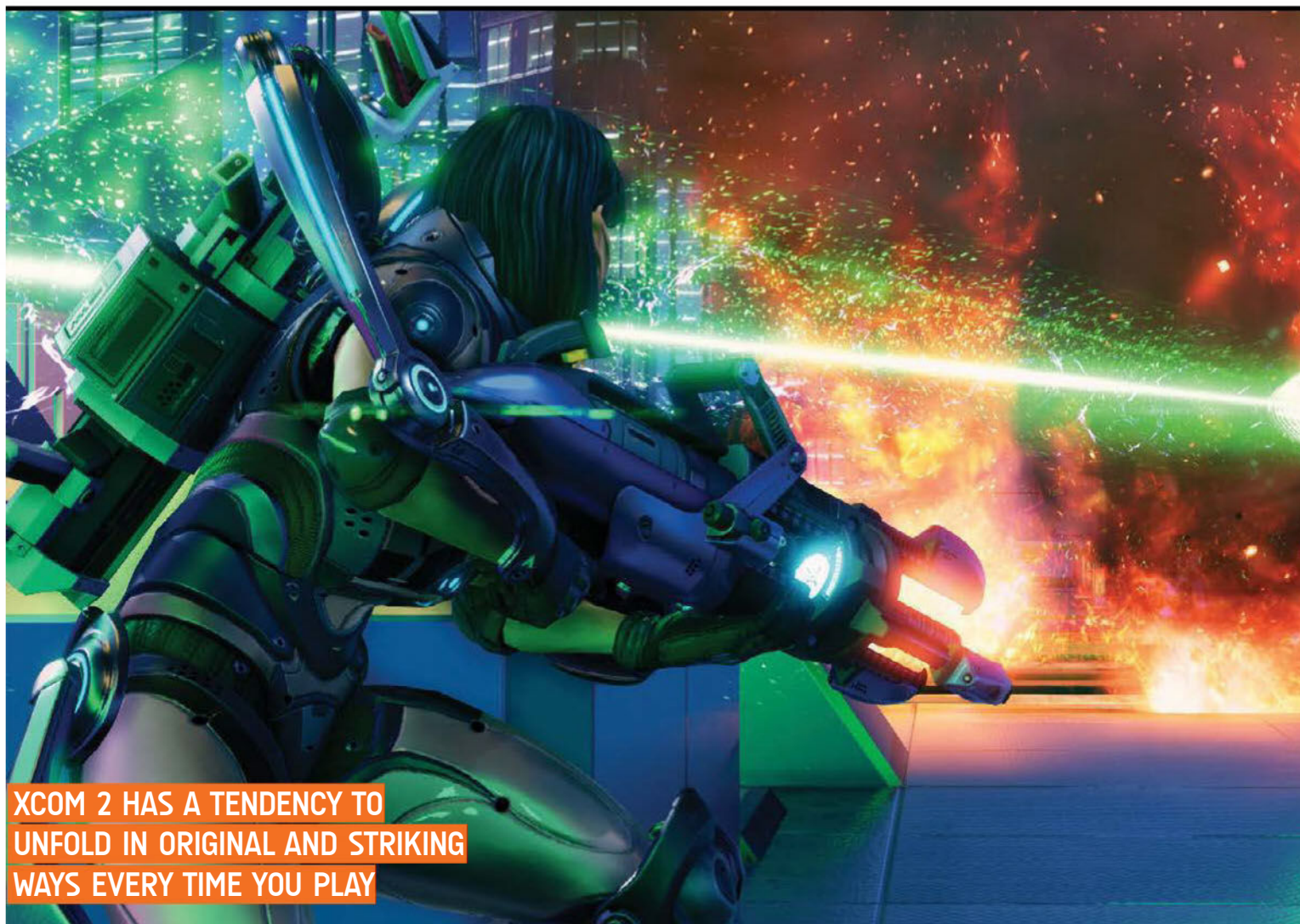
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XCOM 2 HAS A TENDENCY TO UNFOLD IN ORIGINAL AND STRIKING WAYS EVERY TIME YOU PLAY

FRIENDSHIPS RUINED

XCOM 2 builds upon the multiplayer experience and structure introduced in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, which sees you and another player jump into pre-built maps and do battle until one of you falls. You're given a fixed number of points at the outset of a game to build out your squad of human and alien units, before heading out against your opponent; it's a terribly simple setup that works well. It's also incredibly rewarding being able to take control of the enemy units you've been cursing for hours throughout the campaign – just be wary of the player that fields an entire squad of Chrysalids – there's a circle of hell dedicated to those cretins.





TIME BRINGS AN END TO ALL THINGS XCOM 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: Firaxis
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: YES
MINIMUM SPEC:
OS: Windows 7, 64-bit
PROCESSOR: Intel Core 2 Duo E4700 2.6 GHz or AMD Phenom 9950 Quad Core 2.6GHz
MEMORY: 4 GB RAM
GRAPHICS: 1GB ATI Radeon HD 5770, 1GB NVIDIA GeForce GTX 460 or better
STORAGE: 45 GB available
SOUND CARD: DirectX compatible sound card

Left: *XCOM 2*'s Mutans are decidedly more mobile than their *Enemy Unknown* predecessors, just one of many familiar elements that Firaxis has devilishly tweaked.

Time is our most precious commodity.

We are handed our allocation of it and once it's gone, it's gone forever. In *XCOM 2* it never feels like time is on your side. Instead it seems that it, along with the lives entrusted to your command, is forever fading. In the grand scheme of things, *XCOM 2* tasks you with fighting for humanity's survival, but most of the time you'll find yourself fighting for the individual. And most of the time, you're going to fail.

It's perhaps only developer Firaxis that would have the cojones to set up such a perilous game scenario, but then the studio had no choice. *XCOM* has always been celebrated as a difficult franchise, but how do you challenge a player base that has relished the opportunity to pump hundreds of hours attempting Impossible Ironman mode runs (where the difficulty is not only set to soul-destroying, but the ability to create multiple save files is torn away from players)? Well, you just make it soul-destroying from the off. Set 20 years after the events of original game, Firaxis makes the assumption that you probably failed to save humanity first time around and so that's where *XCOM 2* kicks off. That's right, this is a sequel that

begins rooted in the fail state of its predecessor – like we said, serious cojones.

The invaders have won and an alien-led dictatorship known as the Advent is ruling the Earth with an iron fist. The remnants of the human resistance are scattered, attempting to rally against the Advent from the shadows. No longer are you sat defending locations and responding to threats

one at a time – you're on the offensive now.

The shift from tactical defensive strategies to guerrilla force tactics has had some radical

implications for the traditional *XCOM* formula. Sure, you'll still be building an army of ragtag soldiers (foolishly imbuing each of them with the identity and look of your closest friends), researching new technologies, acquiring resources, and putting it all to use in strategic, turn-based battles. But with the tide turned against you, the focus is on sabotaging alien operations across the globe and making small dents in the enemy's war machine. Firaxis has woven the narrative and gameplay together more tightly this time around; every tactical decision and shot fired can have grave implications for your team and overall progress.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

GUERRILLA WARFARE: With the resistance fighters on the back foot against the aliens, combat feels more visceral and immediate.



Left: Take out an enemy at range or escape a near death situation and *XCOM 2* will celebrate the event from a tactical viewpoint. It brings a cinematic sheen to the entire ordeal.



Left: You'll spend most of your time juggling numbers in *XCOM 2*, desperately trying to work out whether the percentage chance of hitting an enemy is worth the risk or whether you can sit in Overwatch behind cover for another turn.

Your soldiers now drop into combat concealed, a new mechanic in *XCOM 2* that gives you the freedom to move around the procedurally generated scenarios and get a feel for the action and enemy placement before engagement. Sneaking through the fog of war past enemies and coordinating complex ambushes on unsuspecting patrols is exhilarating every time. It captures the idea of guerrilla warfare more than anything we've experienced before, though a tactical manoeuvre has a tendency to go to hell just as often as it succeeds. Putting the pieces in place before a firefight takes as much consideration as finishing one does. Seeing your troops fall one by one after a seemingly great plan unravels in front of your eyes can be truly heartbreaking.

The focus on stealth and swift hit-and-run tactics brings a dynamism to *XCOM 2* that we never realised it was missing to begin with. Still, while you might feel like you have the time to consider every possibility, *XCOM 2* has a tendency to put you up against the clock: recover this loot in five turns, defend this station in six, get to this scientist defector in nine otherwise it's game over on a small mission-to-mission scale. It's here where adrenaline can get the better of your tactical brain, forcing commanders to make rash plays and power grabs in a desperate rush to recover resources you require to halt the steady stream of shit coming your way. But *XCOM 2* has a tendency to unfold in original and striking ways every time you play.

There's always something to worry about here. With the pressure constantly piling on *XCOM 2* has a tendency to get a little exhausting, especially when things don't go your way (which is most of the time), but there's something about the slickness of the systems and breadth of options available to you that keeps you engaged with the action. Keeping your squad alive is a constant struggle; getting them back to your flying base – dubbed the Avenger – without critical wounds taking them out of the fight for weeks is, at times, seemingly impossible. This is part of the wonderful *XCOM* cycle though, wherein you find your best soldiers sat in the med bay while you desperately, helplessly feed rookies to the slaughterhouse.

It's the sheer depth of options, array of tactical decisions available, the endless considerations to be made, and overall unpredictability of enemy movements and tactics that combines to make *XCOM 2* so damned playable though. Storming through a scenario unscathed is captivating, struggling through a fraught engagement is fist-clenching, and, ultimately, watching your annoying friend's avatar get mercilessly gunned down by a group of Sectoids proves to be a bittersweet moment; sure they have been asking for it, but lord knows they were the best damned sharpshooter in the squad. Humanity is clearly doomed. But our time with *XCOM 2* is not.

FAQs

Q. ANY EXPERIENCE NECESSARY?

While it is a sequel to *Enemy Unknown*, you don't need to have played it. *XCOM 2* will quickly get you up to speed with the systems and mechanics.

Q. HOW'S IRONMAN MODE?

It's brutal. *XCOM 2* is insanely difficult on its standard 'Veteran' difficulty anyway, Ironman is truly punishing now.

Q. IS IT REPLAYABLE?

This is a game built on replayability. Hell, it'll take you a few runs through the campaign to even get a successful ending.

Right: Character customisation is far more robust this time around, which only makes the inevitable deaths of your friends and loved ones even harder to take. Even the very best commanders will lose people in *XCOM 2*.

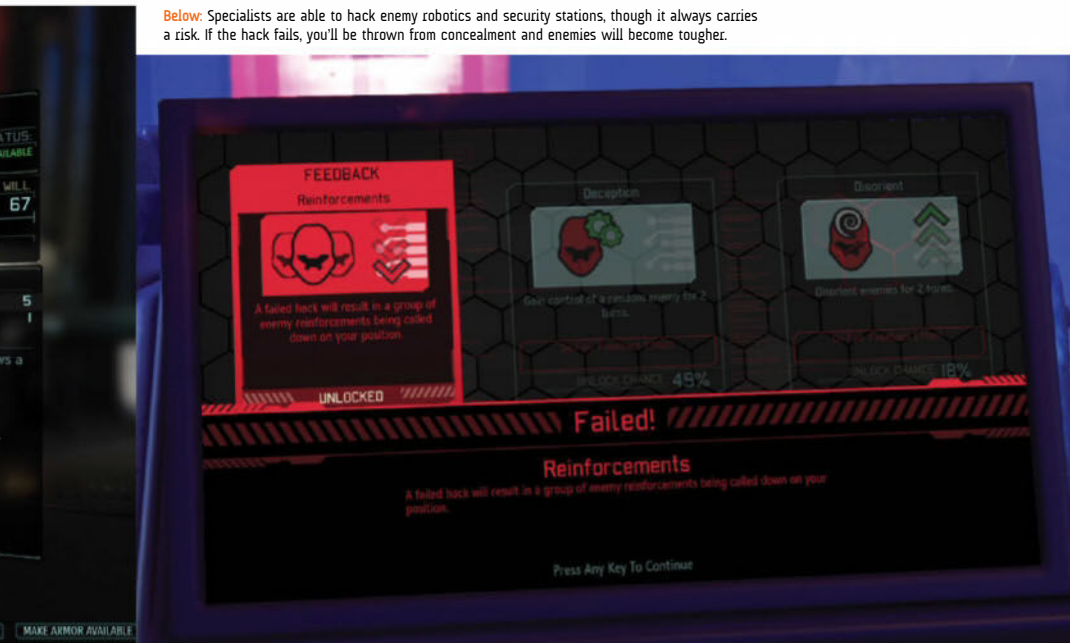


The thrill of the action also has a way of following you back to base. Like its predecessors, *XCOM 2* has an overarching layer of tactical consideration that forces you into desperate win or lose scenarios. The rebellion is set up in the roaming Avenger base, and it's here that you get an overview of a world in crisis. Establishing links with rogue survivor cells, scooping up resources and widening your influence into new nations is always done with an eye on the progress bar towards failure that beams unwaveringly at the top of the world map. *XCOM 2* ensures that its out-of-combat considerations

Above: The Viper is one of the new enemy types, a vicious creature that ensnares soldiers and gradually binds the life from their bodies.

SEEING YOUR TROOPS FALL ONE BY ONE AFTER A SEEMINGLY GREAT PLAN UNRAVELS IN FRONT OF YOUR EYES CAN BE TRULY HEARTBREAKING





Below: Specialists are able to hack enemy robotics and security stations, though it always carries a risk. If the hack fails, you'll be thrown from concealment and enemies will become tougher.



ENHANCE YOUR GAME

▣ *XCOM 2* being a PC exclusive has given Firaxis the opportunity to really bring mod support to the forefront of the gaming experience. We're already seeing some wonderfully creative mods pour in from the community – as well as Long War Studios, the team behind the stellar Long War campaign mod for *Enemy Unknown*. Highlights thus far include an SMG alternative to the Assault Rifle, enhanced Muton enemies (because you needed a bigger challenge, right?) and weapons in the shape of a Corgi – because the Internet.

Below: This overview of the globe will cause much frustration as it steadily shows your loosening grip on the situation at hand.



are powered by a constant state of motion and tension; once you reach the late game you quickly get the sense that one wrong tactical deployment or decision could spell the end of your entire campaign.

Managing resources, expanding the facilities of the Avenger base, building tactical upgrades and enhancing your troops is common practice in *XCOM*, though there's one location that represents the game better than all else – the bar. It acts as a memorial of sorts to your fallen squad brethren, displaying an ever-expanding list that represents your surmounting failures in combat. Looking over the names of the departed recalls a vivid memory of the time, place and scenario that led to their place on the list. Firaxis has designed its game in such a way that you build relationships with the characters you create and, on many occasions, it's the fallen stars that you'll remember once the gunfire subsides.

It's a shame then, that *XCOM 2* is lacking the polish that would truly reflect its status as one of the all-time greats. There are times where its difficulty swings from challenging to outright unfair. Games like this live and die by their rule-sets, but the sense that enemies are restricted, largely, by the same rules of logic and chance that we as comes crumbling down when they blast through walls, dodge shotgun blasts from point-blank range, and generally defy the laws of *XCOM* to survive. Your fun is constantly hanging on the game communicating fairly, and when the AI circumvents its own rules it can ruin some of the appeal. Couple this with technical glitches that see the camera drift away

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



▣ Frozen in terror looking at the overworld map, desperately stalling for time as you try to make your next potentially game-ending move as the enemy inexorably approaches.

8 HOURS



▣ Trying to hold back the tears as it becomes apparent that some of your heroes – ones that have been there from the start – simply aren't going to make it back to the base with you.

3 DAYS



▣ The crushing realisation that there's no way that you can win and so you begin a New Game, pumped with the knowledge that you won't repeat the same mistakes (you totally will though).

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BALANCED DIFFICULTY: It might be a tough game, but *XCOM 2* rarely feels unfair, prompting you to always try and be better.

from combat, the action halt altogether and enemy reactions playing out in a jumbled tandem of gunfire and noise, and you'll wonder whether publisher 2K Games should have delayed the game for a little longer instead of relying on the inevitable post-launch patches to rectify these inaccuracies.

These problems are but a blip in an otherwise stunning strategy experience though. Clever design runs through nearly every aspect of *XCOM 2*. It forces you to think on different levels for every operation, play with tactics and experiment with daring manoeuvres at every opportunity. Every level of the game's design has not only been refined, but seamlessly interwoven to

interact without you being any the wiser. It ensures that *XCOM 2* always feels like it's pushing you to try, to succeed in the face of what looks to be certain failure. The looming presence of dread is constant, and that makes your victories all the sweeter. With time always against you, every minute spent in the company of your squad becomes a blessing – even as you come to realise you'll likely be toasting their virtual victories in the bar by the time the evening is out. In the end, time has a way of sneaking up and murdering even the best of us; never has that been more crushingly documented than in *XCOM 2*.

VERDICT

RELENTLESS STRATEGY DEFINED BY TACTICAL BRILLIANCE



gamesTMmag scored 9 for *XCOM 2*

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THE BEST JUST GOT BETTER...

Street Fighter V

Ever since the stretchy-limbed yoga practitioner made his debut in *Street Fighter II*, Dhalsim's fireball has slowly puffed its way across the screen in a straight line following his 'Yoga fire!' cry. For fans, it's every bit as iconic as Ryu's Dragon Punch, Guile's flash kick or Zangief's lariat, a move that has become instinct for anyone who has spent more than a few hours with Capcom's famous fighting game series – what it does, how to do it, why it's useful. Except now, 25 years later, 'Yoga fire!' is followed by a fireball that dramatically arcs upwards before slowly floating back down to earth. Wait, what?

It might seem like a strange thing to focus on, but this seemingly minor difference is symbolic of the widespread change that Capcom has employed for its familiar cast, as it has tweaked and twisted established convention for *Street Fighter V*. Dhalsim's fireballs are useful for air control and set-ups rather than ground control, being used alongside his long-reaching limbs to harass opponents from a safe distance.

Every returning character has something that is different than what you remember – Vega now has two stances with their own target combos and moves; Zangief can activate body armour as a pseudo-parry; Nash has a teleport. And so on. If *SFIV* was the nostalgic jolt in the arm the series (and perhaps the fighting game genre as a whole) needed to become relevant again, then *Street Fighter V* is the confident push forward into new and uncharted territory, and nowhere is that more evident than the refreshed move sets.

Although, the differences don't just come from revised move lists. Each character has a V-Skill, which can be called upon any time, and V-Trigger, activated once its relevant meter is full. These give each character something a little different to their standard special moves – R.Mika can call in her tag-team partner from off the screen to set-up difficult-to-block situations for her opponent, for example, while Ken can effectively set himself on fire as his special moves gain new properties. It's a welcome refresher to what we're used to.

And, although they seem like minor additions on the surface, they help differentiate the cast by giving character specialists new tools to play with and change the dynamics of the match-up. Dhalsim can set the ground on fire for a damage-over-time effect, which gives his opponent a new problem to solve – stand in the fire and trade blows? Risk jumping towards Dhalsim to escape? Take the safe option of backing off but then giving Dhalsim room to breathe again?

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



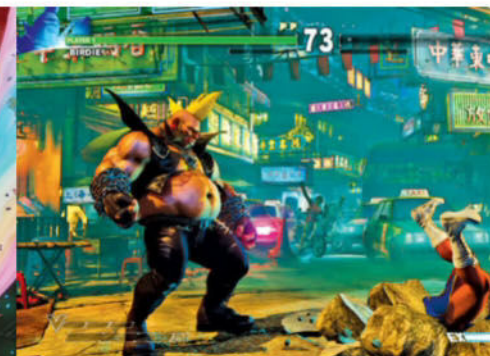
Above: Although not quite as obnoxious as in *Street Fighter IV*, cinematics still have a part to play and relegate one player to the role of spectator for too long.



Then, of course, there are the new characters: Laura is disappointingly bland but Necali, Rashid and F.A.N.G. all bring unique gameplay to the series, feeling more like Decapre and El Fuerte-style additions rather than Evil Ryu or Oni-style bores. In this age of *Ultra Street Fighter IV*, *Ultimate Marvel vs Capcom 3* and *BlazBlue: Central Fiction*, the size of the roster in *Street Fighter V* is a little disappointing, but at least the new faces are fun and the returning characters are interesting.

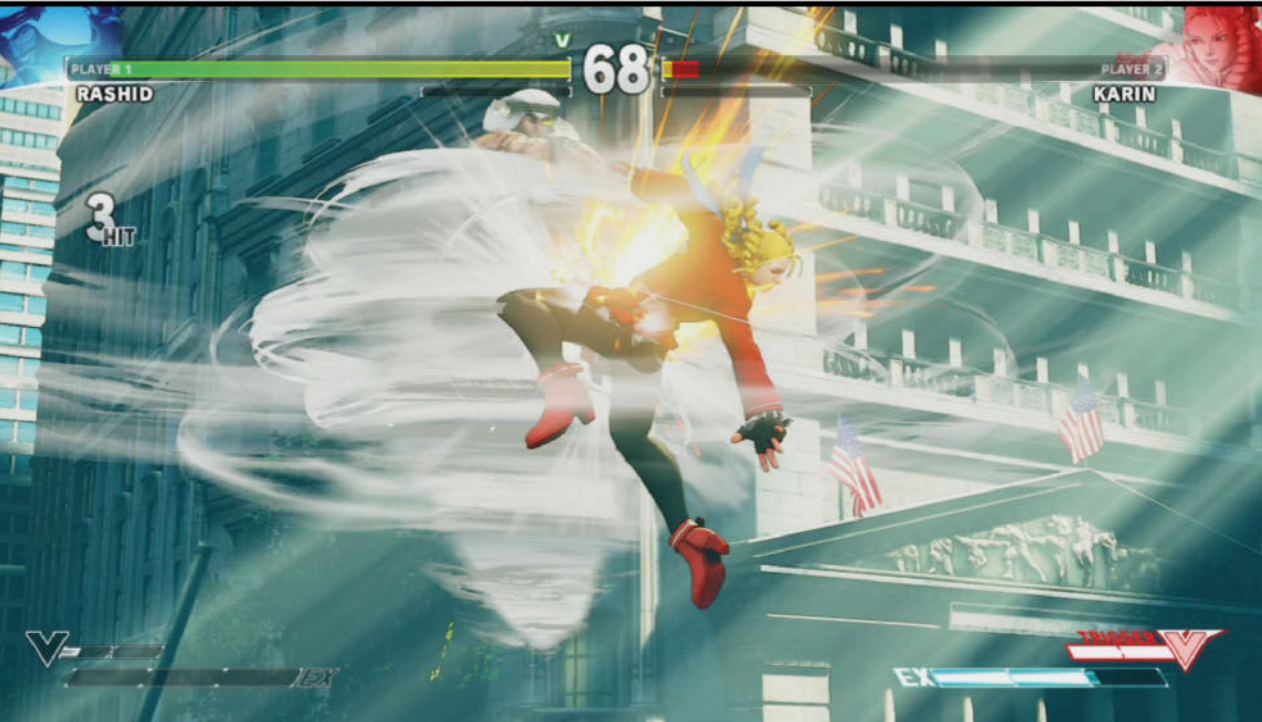
Dig a little deeper, though, and the biggest change isn't found with the revamped characters or even the addition of V-Skill and V-Trigger

Above: While she was awful in *Alpha 3*, R.Mika now has plenty of tools to help her compete in *Street Fighter V*, including her fantastic (and useful) super.



Right: Rashid is our favourite of the new characters, thanks to his ability to zip around the screen and close distance quickly. He's interesting, unusual and effective.

**CAPCOM HAS TWEAKED AND TWISTED
ESTABLISHED CONVENTION FOR
STREET FIGHTER V**



FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?

There are 16 in total, compared to the 19 that *Street Fighter IV* launched with.

Q. WHAT ABOUT DLC CHARACTERS?

Alex, Ibuki, Balrog, Guile, Urien and Juri are the confirmed DLC characters, with Alex first to arrive.

Q. DO I HAVE TO PAY FOR THEM?

Not necessarily – you can unlock them with in-game Zeny, which you can earn by playing online. Just keep winning!

ON BALANCE

Rather than releasing new iterations of *Street Fighter V*, Capcom has promised to tweak what's already here, which is good news for balance. Even though it's early days, it seems like some characters already need work. Laura doesn't have much to work with outside of her slow EX fireball pressure tactics and lacks the range to really bully opponents with, while Rashid has the tools to nip around the screen at lightning speed, a real boon in a game where the pace is considered and deliberate. Will Capcom look to nerf Rashid or buff Laura? The approach Capcom has taken in the past is to buff weaker members to join the strong members of the cast – we'll have to wait and see if that remains true with *Street Fighter V* as well.



moves. It comes from the mechanics that power the game itself. *Street Fighter IV* became notorious for its 'one-frame link combos', which became lazy shorthand for those that bemoaned the strenuous execution demands needed to pull off the combos essential to compete at higher levels, particularly later on in the game's life as players became more experienced and battle-hardened. Capcom has reworked its combo system for *Street Fighter V* so not only are combos easier to execute, they don't lead to eye-watering damage either.

The result is that *Street Fighter V* echoes the competitive mentality behind its enduring classic *Super Street Fighter*

II Turbo – matches are about finding the right distance to be effective, using your normal moves well and knowing match-ups, rather than overwhelming your opponents with one-frame link combos and option selects. You need to master your opponent, not the game engine; and that one subtle difference permeates the entire approach to play, making *Street Fighter V* far more accessible to those scared off by FADC Ultra attack shenanigans of the past.

Perhaps it's just as well, because *Street Fighter V* will be relying on its multiplayer appeal more heavily than it should. Arcade mode is three fights (three!) broken up by picture-and-text 'story', the most bare-bones of token efforts, and... there's little else to entertain players outside of online modes. Story Mode DLC is on the way but given what's currently here and the depressing dearth

of game modes, it's hard to believe Story Mode will measure up to the standards set by *Mortal Kombat* or *BlazBlue* when catering for the single player. There's an argument that a modern-fighting game shouldn't really have to focus on anything outside of multiplayer but if you're going to include it at all, why not do it well and make it part of the core release?

Regardless, the real test for *Street Fighter V* isn't now. That will come in the weeks, months

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SOLE MAN: It's impossible to know what the development budget is but the absence of single-player modes is a real disappointment. Any challenge modes, time trials, a fleshed-out story, anything would be welcome here.

and years to come. With the stripped-back combo system, slower game pace and removal of chip-damage deaths, there's a chance that *Street Fighter* could feel too slow. But who really knows? That

will only come after arcade sticks have been crushed under the weight of desperate Zangief players cranking out last-second SPDs, after dramatic victories deciding tournament finals between a bouncy Rashid and defensive Dhalsim, after an army of frustrated players scream at Ryu bores for throwing yet another full-screen fireball. *Street Fighter* has always found its glory in these moments and *Street Fighter V* has set the series up for another multi-year run amongst the elite of gaming's competitive multiplayer titles.

VERDICT

CONFIDENT, EXCITING AND FRESH

gamesTMmag scored 8 for **Street Fighter V**

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DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND

The Witness

Making something appear effortless might be the hardest thing to achieve in any creative field.

It can be a difficult quality to articulate too, because ultimately it's about making it seem like nothing incredible is going on. Everything makes sense and is as it should be. In a 3D sandbox space with limitless possibilities, the fact that *The Witness* feels very natural and your path is guided so subtly and cleverly, is one of its greatest triumphs. *The Witness* feels simple and comfortable as a world, but there's clearly so much work behind it.

Enjoying the gameplay of *The Witness* and appreciating it as a piece of crafted entertainment goes hand in hand. We find it hard to separate the two in terms of our experience of the game, although that does also speak to a lack of immersion and the arm's length at which *The Witness* holds you. You are observing this world rather than being made to feel you are a part of it, which makes sense given the title the game has been given. Observation is at the heart of how *The Witness* unfolds and how you progress through it. You need to be aware of the objects around you, how they align depending on where you stand, what shapes might appear. The number of 'eureka' moments you'll have playing it are difficult to count, but they tend to stem from you understanding that this is a game. You're looking for the building blocks and the signs that this is a world built for a single purpose by a developer.

■ When we get down to it, this is a puzzle game, of course, and it seems important to address the key concern with *The Witness'* puzzle variety that it might just be a bunch of line-drawing through mazes. That is the primary form of interaction you have through the game, but – not unlike the way Jonathan Blow's previous game *Braid* played with your increasing understanding of time manipulation or how the *Portal* games taught you how to play with physics and then gradually made you rethink those rules – *The Witness* develops its simple premise in some

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Thekla, Inc.
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: The stylised world of *The Witness* is really something. Hidden images and fun misdirections abound as creepy statues become laughably silly depending on your perspective. It's a supremely well-designed world.



FAQS

Q. IS IT JUST DRAWING A LINE?

Yes, but you would be amazed (no pun intended) at how much variety can be found in that concept.

Q. IS IT REALLY WORTH £30 FOR AN INDIE GAME?

Yes, this is a much deeper, larger experience than your traditional indie fare.

Q. SHOULD I FIND A GUIDE TO HELP?

We would recommend doing as much as you can without. Try using a notepad to draw puzzles out first for yourself. It's much more enjoyable that way.



**IT'S TERRIBLY IMPORTANT TO NOT
CONFUSE ALOOFNESS WITH MYSTIQUE**



Below: You'll need to consider *everything* when approaching a new area: what shadows are being cast, what might move, even perhaps the texture of the screens or the sounds around you.



engaging ways. Using the glare on a screen to see the hidden solution in a maze with no apparent barriers, for instance, or using the shadow of a tree to guide you through a path. The basics remain the same, but the methodology changes from zone to zone in ways that keep things interesting and holds to the theme of the area you're in. Working out how you're supposed to interpret the puzzle is always the first step before trying to solve it and the way *The Witness* walks you through its rules visually (there's never any text or voiceover to explain anything) is very good.

So, those fearing that *The Witness* is going to be pompous, overblown, pseudo-philosophical claptrap really don't need to be too concerned. There's some of that if you want to go and

explore it and think about it, but the puzzling is what it's all about and the broader mystery of this island and why all these puzzles are here, let alone why you're here, is kept way out in the distance.

■ It's terribly important to not confuse aloofness with mystique, however. As mentioned, *The Witness* keeps you at arm's length; you are an observer more than a participant. The fact that you'll almost certainly be drawing lines and boxes in a real-life notebook at your side (which we highly recommend, because getting through this game otherwise is going to be a serious challenge) is one of the many ways you're constantly being pulled out of the game.

This is not an immersive fantasy experience, and it's one of the things that could count against *The Witness*, especially when compared to other games that have played in these fields before. The previously mentioned *Portal* for instance does a better job of offering immediate puzzles, a broader mystery and a level of engagement with that mystery that drives you through the experience. *The Witness* relies far more heavily on your innate curiosity. If you enjoy seeing visual illusions

born from perspective and playing with your 2D take on the world through the TV screen, that should be enough to keep you looking, exploring and discovering. Others might be left feeling a little cold.

But, for all its disconnection, *The Witness* sports a deep intelligence, which fascinated us as we explored. The evolution of the maze puzzles, the way they change in scale, complexity and styles of interaction were all very compelling, but they're not necessarily building towards any great revelation or twist as you experienced with *Braid*.

In that game you're drawn forward by the small snippets of narrative that tease a conclusion. *The Witness* promises no such comforts. The searching and investigating can be

fun with the right mindset, but, with no clearly defined end in sight, it can feel weightless. In fact, the small hidden audio recorders and movie clips feel even less connected than the island and puzzles do. In the latter there is progression and connection between disparate locales, while in the former there are broader concepts and thoughts, but no immediately solvable interweaving concept.

The Witness is immensely challenging then, both in terms of the complex and idiosyncratic puzzle design and how it challenges your innate need to find meaning from it all. Buy into the parts you want, skip the rest, but it's hard to ignore the pure design brilliance of this game. It has its moments of dull repetition, but they are inter-cut with moments of realisation and the triumph of finding solutions again and again. If you have the patience, the perseverance and the inquisitiveness, then, *The Witness* can be hugely rewarding.

VERDICT

SUPREMELY WELL CRAFTED AND CHALLENGING

gamesTMmag scored 9 for
The Witness

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SEEING LINES

■ Have you ever played *Assassin's Creed* or *Skate* for so long that you begin to see interactive elements in the real world as if they were in the game? Well, one of the highlights of playing *The Witness* is when that happens to you in-game. You'll be solving mazes, drawing lines and casually strolling around when all of a sudden a path in front of you, a tree or a shadow will make the outline of something very similar to the starting point of a maze puzzle. You'll think, 'That looks like something; I wonder if I can interact with it?'. And suddenly you realise the world is packed with hidden lines in the rocks, rivers, paths and decorations on buildings. As with so much of this game, observation is key.



ANOTHER ONE OFF THE ASSEMBLY LINE

LEGO Marvel's Avengers

While the LEGO games finally took a step beyond its successful but very familiar formula with last year's ambitious toys-to-life effort *LEGO Dimensions*, *LEGO Marvel's Avengers* is very much Traveller's Tales back in its familiar groove. This is the kind of ultra-polished and sharply comedic licensed action that we've been enjoying for the past decade; as fine-tuned as a LEGO game has ever been, but also one lacking in the some of the scope of its most stellar predecessors.

Instead of *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes'* universe-mashing take on just about every Marvel property you could think of, *Avengers* plays things much closer to home – if your home happens to contain the Blu-rays of both the Joss Whedon *Avengers* flicks, that is. Here, you'll play through key scenes of both movies – there are a surprising amount of them – as well as select flashbacks to individual characters'

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC, Wii U, Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

individual flicks, and a couple of jaunts around a very basic open world. If you've played a LEGO game before, you probably know what to do before the game even loads up: steer the appropriate character to the appropriate shiny gadget on the screen, utilise their special power, then watch as the level gradually rearranges itself to allow you to move on. Get stuck? Just blast everything in sight until LEGO bricks start bouncing around and you can build something to help you progress. It's a formula that has worked for years, and it shows no signs of going anywhere.

LEGO MARVEL'S AVENGERS, WHILE UNQUESTIONABLY FAITHFUL TO ITS SOURCE MATERIAL, JUST DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH TO WORK WITH

Above: The LEGO engine has made a full transition to next (current) gen technology, meaning the plastic characters are shinier than ever and the backgrounds are of a pristine quality. This is a truly lovely looking game.

That said, one of the persistent criticisms of the recent LEGO games has been the disconnect between the pace of their stories and the plodding nature of their action. *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* – still the pinnacle of the franchise, even now – suffers from levels where you're supposedly giving chase to an enemy, but spend ages pottering about with little puzzles along the way, sapping the natural speed of the encounter while simultaneously making the casual brick-based busywork oddly stressful.

LEGO Marvel's Avengers fares far better in this regard. The fast-paced sections require fewer puzzles, and they're less obtuse, meaning you constantly have a sense of forward momentum when the story demands it. In fact, it often eschews puzzling altogether for all-out action. Turret sections, a *Resogun*-like 2D/3D shooter (not the first time we've seen this in a LEGO game, but still cool) and

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?

A typically enormous roster, although a lot of them are generic Shield employees and characters in different costumes.

Q. BOTH MOVIES COVERED?

Yes, and select bits from the character's individual outings.

Q. IS STAN LEE IN IT?

Does The Pope do his business in the forest?



Left: There is an open Manhattan to explore if you so wish, but it's very bare and really not worth bothering with. Other hub areas open up that you can wander around too, but the real focus is on the story missions.



Right: Marvel fanatics will find plenty of nods and references to enjoy throughout, but there just isn't the same depth of source material as *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes*, so the really esoteric stuff doesn't make the cut.



DOUBLE TROUBLE

A new focus on combat doesn't exactly mean you'll be busting out *Bayonetta* combos when you're battling bad guys, but *LEGO Marvel's Avengers* does have a few tricks up its spandex sleeves. Certain scenarios allow you to execute specific double team moves to solve puzzles or eliminate crowds of baddies. One favourite is using Thor's hammer to smash into Captain America's shield with the resulting shockwave flattening everything in sight. There is also a combo counter now, and finishing moves, meaning you can fight with a touch more strategy than just purely button bashing. Fear not, though, you still come straight back to life if you 'die'.



more than a handful of block-shattering brawls punctuate the action. And as a cool-down, a few smarter puzzle sections are given the time to just breathe and be enjoyed at a leisurely pace.

As always, the script is hilarious – although all of the dialogue itself comes from the films – the animators have a relentless thirst for sight gags and simply refuse to stop coming up with creative ways to make you laugh. These universally funny moments have become synonymous with all things LEGO – the animated versions of *Batman* and *LEGO Marvel* have the same sense of humour, and

of course *The LEGO Movie* is a consistent riot.

This is all very entertaining stuff – a marked step up from the somewhat bloated *LEGO Jurassic World* and the character-swapping confusion of *LEGO Batman 3* – but despite its fine-tuned action, it still can't match the sheer magnitude of *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes*. That was a game that did things with the Marvel Universe that have literally never been done – fan service at every level, from the four-year-old who loves Iron Man to the 40-year-old comic nerd who knows every single reference and coos over each new character unlock.

The sad fact is, however, that *LEGO Marvel's Avengers*, while unquestionably faithful to and passionate about its source material, just doesn't have enough to work with. Two very well-known movies let you toy around with a few unusual characters, but for the most part you'll be throwing around Captain America's shield or cutting out shapes with Iron Man's laser, and there will always be a part of us that longs for Mr. Fantastic to wander on screen and turn himself into a spanner.

And of course, there's the argument that *LEGO* games truly need to evolve to capture

our imaginations like they once did, and perhaps real-life toys are not the way to do it. It's food for thought – just how could *Traveller's Tales* reinvent what has made it such a success?

Ultimately, it's important to remember who these games are actually for, though. They're kids' games, specifically designed to be played in tandem with parents. The light puzzling, daft humour and endless collecting are perfect fodder for the under-10s, and in actual fact this game is a far better way for very young children to enjoy *The Avengers* stories

than the movies – it's snappier, funnier and less violent, but manages to still hit the right action beats to thrill those enthralled with all things superheroic.

Make the gameplay any more complicated or complex and you run the risk of alienating the very audience it is actually intended for – *LEGO Batman 3* fell foul of this in many ways. It had so many costumes for each character, each with its own power, meaning it was tricky enough for adults to keep track of, let alone five-year-olds.

LEGO Marvel's Avengers is about the purest and slickest *LEGO* game you could hope to play. It doesn't have the scale of gargantuan roster of *Marvel Super Heroes* (a game that, quite frankly, almost shouldn't exist by any logical reasoning), it doesn't have the cross-pollination of *LEGO Dimensions*, but in terms of laying out a plan and executing it, it's almost impossible to fault. Tony Stark himself would be proud.

VERDICT

FAMILIAR, SAFE, BUT AS SHARP AS TONY STARK

gamesTMMag scored 7 for
LEGO Marvel's Avengers

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Although it's a dungeon-crawler rather than a turn-based RPG, battles still feel somewhat like those in the main *Pokémon* series, with each Pokémon having its own move types which can be strong or weak against other types.

LESS MACHAMP, MORE SLOWBRO

Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon

Although the main *Pokémon* games are naturally the most lucrative for Nintendo, there remains a cult following who love its spin-off series, *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon*. Over the years – much like the main games – it too has tended to stick to a formula, with each new instalment only making incremental changes. This fifth edition does nothing to change that.

The concept is similar to previous games in the series: you play as a human who has been mysteriously transformed into a young Pokémon with no previous memories other than that you were once human. After being befriended by another Pokémon and brought to their village, you agree to take part in various adventures while trying to find out more about your past.

While the roguelike gameplay of *Super Mystery Dungeon* should be familiar to anyone who's already played one of its

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Spike Chunsoft
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

predecessors there are a couple of new mechanics, most notably the way in which you recruit new Pokémon for your team.

Previously the only way to get new Pokémon was to defeat them in battle and hope they'd randomly decide to join you. This time you earn their trust via the new Connection Orb feature, which has you taking on various missions in the game's randomly-generated dungeons.

Through this or other methods, all 720 Pokémon from the main series (as well as their Mega Evolved forms) can be recruited to join your team.

There's the potential for ridiculous levels of strategy with team customisation on that scale but ultimately things get so repetitive that you're likely to lose interest before much of this potential is met. The randomly-generated nature of the dungeons doesn't do enough to mix things up, and as you sit through your umpteenth lengthy cutscene or tutorial section (new ones continue to appear long into the main story) you'll find your patience slowly sapping away.

And yet, there's still plenty to like here. The end game is far more entertaining as

the cutscenes take a back seat and you get to concentrate on trying to recruit all 720 Pokémon to your team. But once you've beaten the main 25-hour storyline, it's unlikely your interest will be maintained long enough to put in the hundreds of hours necessary to see this task through to completion.

Fans of the *Mystery Dungeon* series will know what to expect from this latest offering: its new additions aren't radical enough to

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MEGA EVOLUTIONS: As in *Pokémon X* and *Y*, certain Pokémon can now mega evolve. This allows them to become more powerful, but also attack multiple enemies and even break dungeon walls.

ruin what makes it fun or, crucially, fix what makes it monotonous. Those who are more tolerant of the roguelike genre's repetitive nature and

are excited by the notion of the massive task of collecting all 720 Pokémon are likely to get the most out of it, but for most this is a goal that will likely remain well unreachable by the time boredom sets in.

VERDICT

THERE'S LOADS TO DO BUT IT'S ALL TOO SAMEY

gamesTMag scored 6 for
Pokémon Super Mystery Dungeon

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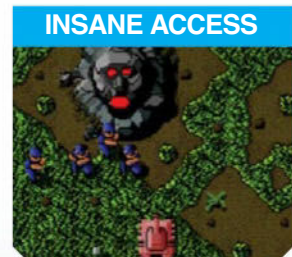
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Below: Everybody's got a favourite FF game, and when you get the ability to transform into your favourite protagonist... It's a magical moment.



Above: Playing the game single player is okay – but you can tell that's not how it was made. Get two or more players involved and you're golden.

MAY THE LIGHT OF THE CRYSTAL SHINE ON YOU

Final Fantasy Explorers

The best thing about *Final Fantasy's* template is that it's so variable: you've got an established set of monster types, jobs and magic that can bend and fit into practically any genre. But just because they can, doesn't always mean they *should*. *Final Fantasy Explorers* is Square's attempt at aping the *Monster Hunter* formula, and whilst the game gets a few things right... It gets a lot of things *wrong*.

Firstly, there's the pacing: any game of this type isn't really going to get started until you're a good ten hours in. This covers the entire story of *Explorers*, so if you're after a meaty RPG-like narrative, steer clear – the story is incredibly low effort, and is usually just character-less walls of text gluing one mission objective to another. Oddly, though, the game *does* get very RPG-like when it comes to combat... To the game's detriment, really.

Because the combat is so simple – assign an ability, press a button, repeat – the game is a lot more accessible than its *Monster Hunter* peers. But it's also far less challenging. Some of the 20 playable classes have Guard commands, and some

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix / Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

can dodge with specific abilities, but there's no dodge roll or any kind of move that grants invincibility frames. This makes battles feel grindier and less action-oriented: more like a lite version of *Final Fantasy XIV* or *Final Fantasy XI* than a *Hunter* game.

If you're blasting through the story to get to the post-game 'real' game, then you'll have to put up with some level design issues, too: walking speed is pretty slow, and navigation is a bit of a dirge, so when you've got to fight a boss *across the whole map* it'll take a good few minutes to even get there. Considering battles only last as long as you're travelling for, the pacing can be both frustrating and all inhibiting.

And yet, we sunk hours into this game. Despite our gripes, we just couldn't stay angry at it. Every time the game threw a new summon at us – from the opening fight with Bahamut, of all things, to a stormy encounter with Odin – the game just clicked. There's a monster recruiting selection of side-missions, too, that'll appeal to the

Pokémon fan in any 3DS owner, and a series of fan-service dedicated transformations that allow you to turn into protagonists from main games past.

If you've got a team of four players, all wailing on, say, Ramuh with your various abilities and Limit Breaks, the game *shines*.

In these scenarios, it feels far more MMORPG than it does action-RPG (you're balancing DPS with someone tanking, whilst someone buffs or heals). It takes a

while for *Explorers* to really open up and reveal that shining crystal at its centre, but once it does, you can forgive the game its shortcomings and take it for what it is: a respectful homage to both *Monster Hunter* and *Final Fantasy* legacies.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A BIT DODGY: It's a small complaint really, but a dodge roll would have made some of the more repetitive encounters a lot more interesting.



VERDICT

INTERESTING, BUT TAKES 20 HOURS TO GET GOING

6

gamesTMag scored 6 for
Final Fantasy Explorers

Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**

Left: The quality of the writing throughout *Undertale* is not only excellent, but also consistently funny and twisted. Tune into the humour and the game will go up a level in your estimations.



GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Undertale

If we'd have told you at the beginning of 2015 that one of the year's greatest success stories would be an 8-bit-style RPG where you don't even have to fight enemies, you'd most likely have laughed the very words off our pages. But it happened. A devout and adoring fan base sprung up around this oddity almost overnight and on closer inspection of the game in question, it's not hard to see why.

You see, hiding behind that tatty old disguise is one of the most playful, creative and involving RPGs we've had the pleasure of playing in quite some time. By not just steering clear of typical genre tropes, but often actively working against them or sending them up, every scene and encounter feels fresh and ready to surprise. The wonderful variety to both cast and writing help with this too, the game's oddball humour veering from intentionally awful puns to dark comedy that lands a sucker punch before lightening the tone again with a little well-

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Toby Fox
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



aimed parody. Developer Toby Fox has cited *Earthbound* as an inspiration (in case you couldn't guess just by looking at *Undertale*) and it's plain to see why – just like the SNES classic, this presents a world that is, at face value, cute, colourful and charming, but one stuck below the shadow of the unease and uncertainty that really keeps you on edge as you explore and interact with it.

Further adding to this wonderful air of mystery is a battle system designed to spit in the face of traditional menu-based affairs. Whether you choose

to do battle with weapons or wits, dynamic options and events on a by-encounter basis make every showdown unique. You might learn how to coax one enemy type into surrendering, but if they come paired with another, it could be that your old method only ends up infuriating the rest of the mob. Similarly, actual combat (and indeed the applications of the system as a whole) also changes and evolves on a whim, bending and breaking its own rules to ensure you're kept guessing every time

a new enemy comes your way. Typical turn-based battle systems often come under fire for how they deteriorate into the same string of triggers and activations in every fight by the end, but believe us when we say that *Undertale* is anything but typical in this regard.

With multiple endings based on how you choose to play out your run, set pieces

that can play out very differently based on your actions and so many incredible moments that we'd love to share but aren't do so for risk of spoiling anything, *Undertale* is easily

one of the indie standouts of last year. Leave your expectations at the door and try talking your way out of trouble for a change – you might find you prefer it to fighting in the end.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GO YOUR OWN WAY: *Undertale's* primary conceit is that 'enemies' needn't be fought at all, with most able to be subdued via smart wordplay. This adds a puzzle element to new encounters, especially when creatures arrive in groups and new rules are added.

VERDICT

IT FILLS YOU WITH DETERMINATION

gamesTMmag scored 9 for *Undertale*

Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



Above: The way that this game plays on the tropes of the RPG genre and parodies familiar gaming concepts is one of the reasons why it feels so fresh.

DARK SOULS MEETS MICROSOFT EXCEL

Darkest Dungeon

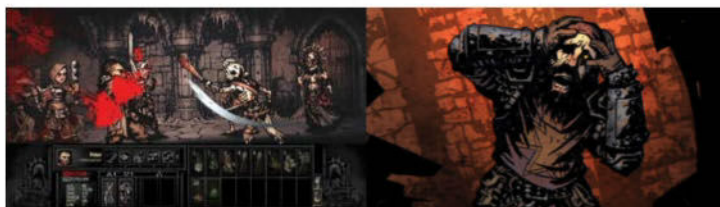
Darkest Dungeon wants to be bleak, evocative, human, but it lacks grace. An RPG/dungeon crawler where, as well as standard effects like bleeding and poison, your characters suffer from mental deterioration and can end up going insane, it plays on the same themes as *Dark Souls*. But where that game explored oppression and attrition through minimalist imagery and diluted, practically invisible systems, *Darkest Dungeon* is absolutely leaden with micro-management.

Your party, your inventory, even the world you inhabit must be organised and levelled up, in excruciating detail, via pages and pages of menus. The game's narrator, with his flowery language and withered oratory, characterises each adventure into the eponymous *Darkest Dungeon* as a personal struggle between wilfulness and fear. The mental health status effects humanise your heroes – beyond the wounds sustained in combat, they are frail, and their personalities respond variously to the rigours of adventure. Even your characters' deaths are permanent.

The game warns, right at the start, that when people die they stay dead. But given *Darkest Dungeon's* preoccupation with numbers, organisation and making sure everything is just so, on paper, its efforts toward human drama go to waste. The whole thing feels cold, computational, clockwork. It's a difficult problem. When

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, PS4, Vita
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Red Hook Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Windows XP, 2 GB RAM, Open GL 3.2+ Compliant, 2 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: As well as physical status effects like bleeding, your heroes gradually lose their minds to the effects of paranoia and insanity.

you're working with systems and algorithms, as you must when creating a videogame, how do you represent things as abstract and unpredictable as human emotions? But *Darkest Dungeon* doesn't even try to find a solution. The three years it spent on Steam Early Access, being iterated and cultivated based on audience feedback, have resulted in a game at odds with itself, trying to be raw and evocative but completely over-engineered.

Nevertheless, the combat is suitably slow and difficult and the atmosphere, occasionally, lays heavy. Some might argue that if you go wrong in *Darkest Dungeon*, if you lose one of its lengthy turn-based battles and your whole party is killed, then it's your fault, since the game is so pristinely and thoroughly designed that it could never be unfair. That isn't true – *Darkest Dungeon* will often wrongfoot you,

unfairly, and at those moments it's a very hard game to like. But if you can find the will to keep going, you'll discover a satisfying, deliciously murky RPG which, even though it doesn't quite land dramatically, is a nice counterpoint to the current canon of twee independent games. Combat is gruelling. Exploration is intense. To that basic extent,

Darkest Dungeon is a more emotional dungeon crawler than it aims to be. But its mechanics are familiar and soulless and above anything, it proves that an

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LESS IS MORE: *Darkest Dungeon* spent a long time in Steam Early Access, being iterated on for years. It shows, but not in a good way. Trimming the features and micro-management would improve it.

extreme difficulty curve is no substitute for finessed drama and smart visual design.

VERDICT

THE NARRATIVE IS DROWNED BY MECHANICS

gamesTMag scored 7 for *Darkest Dungeon*
Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



Above: The world of *Darkest Dungeon* is relentlessly bleak, characterised wonderfully by a deep, heavy colour set and despairing, orotund narrator.



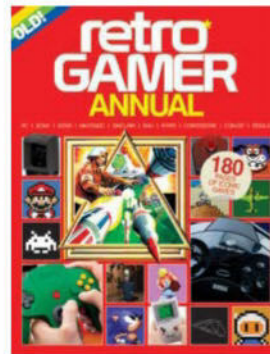
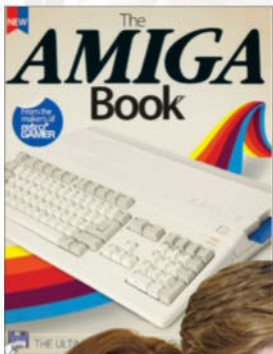
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MORE TO ADD TO THE PILE

Blade & Soul

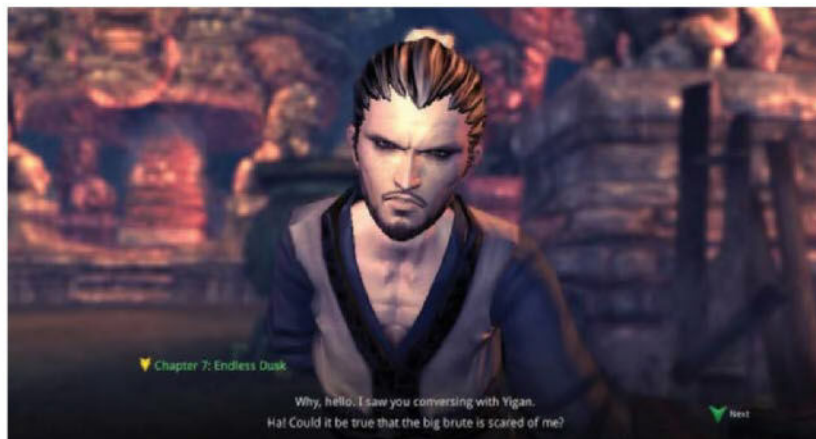
How many times have we been here?

How many times have we glazed over quest text simply to keep the momentum of the grind going? How many times have we scrolled endlessly through spamming text from gold sellers simply to find out what new abilities were unlocked when we levelled up? Everything about *Blade & Soul* feels all too familiar, endemic of an aging genre. This is particularly true when we're utterly ignored by passing players, whose brief existence within the world amounts to little more than the imagined wind softly brushing the hair on our legs as they rush by our 'wave' to whatever aimless task they've yet to accomplish. It's the embarrassingly failed attempts at greetings that really nails home the problem with *Blade & Soul*, and that – unfortunately – isn't a problem it could necessarily have overcome. The issue is one inherent with the modern state of the MMO genre and, if not that, then the people playing these sorts of games.

Blade & Soul doesn't do anything to innovate the genre in any way, but then that's hardly a surprise for a game that has taken four years to make it over from its original Korean release. To put it into perspective Blizzard released *World Of Warcraft* expansion pack *Mists Of Pandaria* in 2012 in an attempt to revitalise the game, which, even then, was beginning to feel old. *Blade & Soul* puts players in the shoes of yet another hand-crafted avatar whose task is simply to march from one zone to another, chomping away at whatever beasts and baddies they're ordered to kill. It's streamlined in a fashion that MMOs need to be these days – at least if they're to maintain gamer interest – meaning you won't be returning to previous areas to hand in quests to recurring characters, instead they'll be conveniently standing at whatever local hub you'll be visiting anyway. Perhaps it sounds unfair to criticise a game better honed for the modern MMO market, but in truth the result is that *Blade & Soul* misses out on the sense of exploratory wonder that really ought to be part of any PvE experience. It's a lovely looking game, admittedly, but is there really much difference between one zone and another, besides the colour palette the designer chose? This is a criticism that can be hurled at a many number of other MMOs, too, but at least *Wildstar* had ambient challenges to tackle and *Elder Scrolls Online* invested heavily

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Korea
PUBLISHER: NCSoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM on Windows XP/3GB otherwise, 25GB GPU, 22GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: *Blade & Soul* is a very pleasant looking game, and its cartoony characters and races means there's a lot of fun to the experience. It's just sadly lost among repetitive fetch quests and a race to max level.



in its lore and story through its quests. *Blade & Soul* just feels like a rush to end-game, a side-effect of the short attention spans of the WOW-added MMO generation. There should be more to an MMO than a thinly veiled push to get to the end and begin the cyclical grind for raid gear as soon as possible.

Thankfully there are some things that the game does do well, with combat standing out as the reason to get involved. The focus here is the martial arts-styled skills, and as a result the mechanics are a little more involved than most other MMOs. Many classes rely heavily



Right: You'll spend most of the levelling experience charging about the map clearing coloured zones before rushing back to hand in quests. It's not fulfilling or entertaining, and makes you wonder why MMOs even include the PvE levelling experience if it's all superfluous to the end-game portion.

BLADE & SOUL IS A RUSH TO END-GAME, A SIDE-EFFECT OF THE SHORT ATTENTION SPANS OF A WOW-ADDLED MMO GENERATION





FAQs

Q. MAX LEVEL?

Currently 45, but expect that to rise fairly soon. It'll not take you too long to reach that either, if you play it solidly.

Q. UP-TO-DATE WITH KOREA?

No, there's plenty of content yet to come over from the Korean version of the game so at least you can expect new stuff to do regularly.

Q. DIFFICULT TO PLAY?

If you expect the typical MMO combat then yes, absolutely, but there's actually an incentive to learn how to play here – and that's enough to come back.

MASSIVELY SINGLE-PLAYER

Perhaps it's age or perhaps the genre isn't quite as novel as it once was, but isn't the idea of an MMO to be multiplayer on a large-scale? These days it seems the term is used to denote a style of gameplay – one that *Blade & Soul* mimics too closely – rather than the concept that originally spawned the acronym. There are dungeons and raids and guilds and tougher world enemies, all that typical guff that you'd expect in an MMO, but no sense of community or togetherness. You may tackle daily quests in groups, you may queue up to complete a dungeon with others... But you won't remember these people or the part they played. They're just functioning tools for another single-player experience, at least until you reach end-game.



on countering, stunning or knocking back enemies, mitigating damage through smart skill selection rather than simply moving away from areas of effect. It's not an intuitive system since there's a vast selection of abilities available to you, with some only appearing after meeting particular prerequisites. For example, Assassins can initiate a Decoy Stance ability that, when hit, will cause them to dash behind an enemy and enter stealth. From this point there are plenty of options, such as stunning the enemy, dealing a great deal of damage or applying a stack of bleed and poison

to name just a few. Certain skills will only appear once these requirements are met, some even replacing the keys for your ordinary combat abilities. As such combat is initially quite confusing, requiring not only a degree of skill, an ability to remember what options are available to you, but also a knack for reacting to any given situation that might arise. It's more like a fighting game than any other MMO out there, and it's this that makes *Blade & Soul* a more interesting experience.

It also explains why much of the PvE is diluted to get players through it, the idea being that they'll have access to the full repertoire of abilities so they can begin mastering their combos and understanding their execution. As you might expect PvP is a far more fulfilling aspect than the solo content of *Blade & Soul*,

so much so that we'd suggest this is the reason you should even consider downloading the game. That's not to say a great deal hasn't been made of the game's story, its characters or where its tale goes, but there's no real intrigue to it. As entertaining as many of the cutscenes are, they are bookends to repetitive gameplay and fail to provide the impact they could've done.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

C-C-C-COMBO: It's *Blade & Soul*'s combat that stands out as its most significant feature and – much like fighting games – it'll take some practise before you truly master your class, which makes it all the more rewarding.

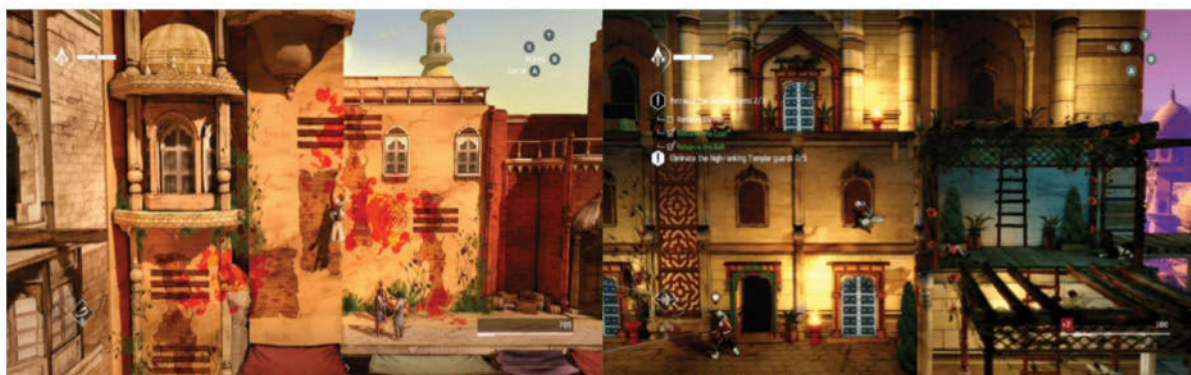
It's this strange grey area where *Blade & Soul* sits. It succeeds at providing enough of a compelling reason to try it out, but in failing to do anything else new it just feels like a rehash of once-standard ideas. To some the genre doesn't need to evolve and that increasingly small group of players will likely have something to get stuck into here, but for the rest there is only so much déjà vu you'll be able to endure. The landscape has changed dramatically over the last few years, but if it's true that an MMO doesn't truly start until you reach max level... well then what's the point of the hours of filler content beforehand? The genre needs a huge mix up, but *Blade & Soul* won't be the one to do it.

VERDICT

GREAT COMBAT WASTED ON AN AGEING CONCEPT

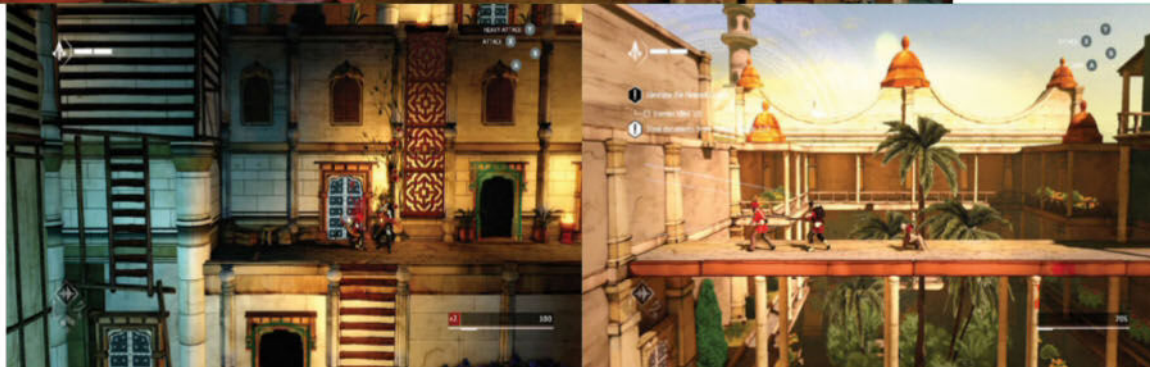
gamesTMmag scored 6 for *Blade & Soul*

Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



Left: While it lacks some of the artistic flourishes of *ACC: China*, this new title is actually the better looking of the *Chronicles* releases so far.

Right: The question we're left asking is what exactly is this game supposed to be adding to the *Assassin's Creed* universe that we haven't experienced already?



PATIENCE DESYNCHRONISED

Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India

It's almost as if Ubisoft thought it would be all too easy to reinvent *Assassin's Creed*; to get some fan favour back on its side.

The main-series has languished in mediocrity for so long now that abandoning half a dimension and wading clumsily into *Mark Of The Ninja* territory must have seemed like the best idea in the world, at least since Corey May decided to orbit a triple-A franchise around mystical fruit. But just as *Assassin's Creed Chronicles* stumbled out of sixteenth-century China with little to show for it, its meddling in colonial India doesn't fare much better.

Climax Studios has clearly attempted to take fan-feedback onboard, the problem is it's listened to the wrong voices. Graphically, *ACC: India* has more soul and identity than its predecessor, but it's bereft of new ideas or solid execution of old ones. For all of *ACC: China's* faults, it at least showed promise was lurking off in the shadows; this follow-up elects to double-down on *Assassin's Creed* worst mechanic – stealth – and frame it around cheap instant-fail mission state objectives, clumsy AI routines and cheap pace-breaking tactics.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Climax Studios
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Assassin's Creed has always been the series that thinks sitting on a bench or bowing your head whilst riding a horse is an acceptable cloaking technique, so we're sure you can imagine how an entire five-hour stealth game handles. It's a deft combination of *Assassin's Creed's* follow-the-man and sneak-as-we-say missions – you know the ones, where you instantly fail if you are seen, heard or have the audacity to even suggest walking away from the

critical path. Player Desynchronised. Player Desynchronised. *Player Desynchronised*. You'll become so familiar with these words that you'll etch them into your skin – a blood pact with the Templars for it all to end.

Sadly, the Templars never come. Instead you're forced to revel in abject disappointment, because *ACC: India* could have been a success. The level design is smart, the voice acting decent and the stealth tools at your disposal can be surprisingly robust. That's what makes it's failings harder to bare; the game quickly, violently, stamps out any player freedom or

desire to experiment. The clumsy mission design, laboured pacing, stilted combat mechanics, and array of enjoyment-assassinating enemy variations and environmental traps are woeful steps in the wrong direction – they force you to engage with the good elements of the game in the most pedestrian ways.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MISSION DESIGN: Players have been moaning about instant desynchronisation missions for almost a decade, they need to get gone.

Assassin's Creed couldn't afford another step in the wrong direction, and yet, here we are again. *ACC: Russia* is still a few

weeks away, but Climax will seriously need to re-evaluate its core systems and mechanics to give it a chance to succeed. *Chronicles* was a leap of faith for Ubisoft; this time there isn't a bail of hay there to break the fall.

VERDICT

GOOD IDEAS ASSASSINATED BY TERRIBLE DESIGN

gamesTMag scored 4 for
**Assassin's Creed
Chronicles: India**
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SUPERB ANIME GETS A WARRIORS REWORKING

Arslan: The Warriors of Legend

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Chances are you've never heard of Arslan, and that's a shame. He's the

star of a recent Japanese anime series that's really rather good – and so it should be since it's the work of Hiromu Arakawa, renowned creator of the brilliant *Fullmetal Alchemist*. And now developer Omega Force, following on from its stellar tie-ins with the *Zelda*, *One Piece* and *Dragon Quest* franchises, has given Arslan's story the *Warriors* treatment with yet another quality hack-and-slasher.

The game is a direct retelling of the 2013 anime series. It follows the story of Arslan, the crown prince of Pars, who is driven from his homeland after an invasion by a cunning army backed by a treacherous soldier who once stood as a key member of Pars' own royal entourage. Forced to go on the

run, Arslan embarks on a perilous journey to build an army of his own and mount a counter-offensive. It sounds predictable, but surprisingly isn't, and touches on some serious themes, including slavery, treachery and fundamental human nature.

This tale of war serves as a fitting backdrop for the inevitable massive battles that ensue, and fans of the series will be instantly at home here. The iconic crowd-wrecking combos return in force, along with the satisfyingly visceral feeling of battering your way through hundreds of enemy soldiers. Characters

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WARRIORS NEEDS NAVI: The chaos of combat would be greatly enhanced with an intuitive lock-on system like that of the *Zelda* games. Perhaps the ability to only lock-on to key targets would be the answer.

and weapons are upgradeable, while new combos can be unlocked, giving fans of the genre plenty to enjoy. It's a system that boasts a simplistic exterior while offering more invested gamers a deeper array of techniques to master, including parrying, mid-combo weapon switching, stat-boosting cards and elemental attacks.

An extra dose of insanity is added with Mardan Rush attacks, which see you momentarily controlling your entire army at once, stampeding in your chosen direction and obliterating all in your path. But where *Arslan: The Warriors of Legend* excels is in how well it draws from the source material. The anime's

cast of well-realised characters makes for an interesting roster of fighters, while its gorgeous cel-shaded visuals mimic Arakawa's iconic art style perfectly.

Unfortunately, the game suffers at the hands of a cumbersome camera, which proves a particular annoyance when trying to target a specific enemy amongst the chaos. Also frustrating is the lack of localised voice work; with subtitles being the only English-language option, the intense battles leave you with little time to read and absorb much of the mid-battle dialogue, which often includes plot and mission-related details.

Arslan: The Warriors of Legend doesn't stray too far from the tried and tested *Warriors* formula. But, once again, Omega Force has done an excellent job of capturing the essence of a brilliant source material while combining it with a solid, combo-filled slasher – and arguably the best-looking *Warriors*-style game to date.

VERDICT

A GORGEOUS VERSION OF THE IMMORTAL WARRIORS FORMULA

7

gamesTMmag scored 7 for
Arslan: The Warriors of Legend

Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



Above: Arslan's army-wrecking move is the Mardan Rush, a special attack that sees you take control of your entire army to stampede across the battlefield, smashing your way through blockades and defeating hundreds of soldiers.



Above: *Dynasty Warriors* games can be a mixed bag in the visual department, but Omega Force has done an excellent job of recreating the iconic visual art style of *Fullmetal Alchemist* creator Hiromu Arakawa, who helmed the *Arslan* anime series.

Above: On paper, *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo* is a fantastic celebration of one of rally's legends, though technical issues really hamper the overall experience. It's disappointing, because the game does so many other things right.



JUST SHORT OF SUCCESS

Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo

In any other year, we might have been hailing *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo* as a breakout title for Milestone. The studio, known for pumping out competent yet forgettable simulation racing games over the last two decades, has finally shaken off the restrictive official WRC licence and found itself associated with one of the all-time rally greats. But, sadly, for every corner *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo* takes successfully, it quickly finds itself careering off-track by the next.

And yet, *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo* features a staggering array of content. Milestone has wasted no time in taking full advantage of Loeb's career (nine World Championships!), with *Rally Evo* not only successfully delivering a broad overview of the racing legend's exploits behind the wheel, but of some of the most spectacular stages of the World Rally Championship as well. Honestly, the course selection might be unrivalled here; Milestone has outdone itself in terms of track authenticity. Every single locale feels like it has been recreated with love; each and every claustrophobic corner and treacherous trail demanding to be tamed and conquered.

This is complemented by a huge array of cars in the garage too. There's an emphasis on Citroëns, of course; with *Rally Evo* even affording you the opportunity to sample some of Loeb's highlights from across his career in the correct era-appropriate

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: PQube
DEVELOPER: Milestone
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: Codemasters' *DiRT Rally* really set a new benchmark for rally racing, and that's something Milestone just can't live up to. Still, this at least shows growth – Milestone is on track to deliver its greatest sim racer sometime soon.

vehicle. But even if Citroëns aren't to your tastes, there will be something that is within the 50+ car-list. The package continues to look more attractive still as *Rally Evo* boasts a surprisingly deep career mode, but problems arise as soon as you get onto the track.

At a time where many rally fans are still praising the incredible handling model on display in Codemasters' *DiRT Rally*, the offering from *Rally Evo* couldn't have come at a worse time. Criminal amounts of understeer often make threading through the intricate tracks a nightmare, while some cars have a tendency to feel like they're gliding on ice.

This situation isn't helped by an array of dreary technical problems either: scenery is flat and lifeless, dirt and dust effects are

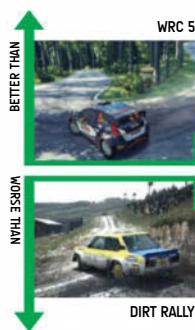
disappointing, while the sound effects will leave you wanting. This, combined with a frequently erratic frame-rate, produces a game that desperately needed more time and money for the developers to fully

realise its vision. It's a shame, because *Rally Evo* boasts such an attractive feature set – and from a studio we know is capable of mastering simulation mechanics – but this year it just couldn't compete with Codemasters' stellar return to the scene.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NEW ENGINE It might have the content, but Milestone needs a new engine powering its games to truly have a winner on its hands.



VERDICT

NOT BAD, BUT UNABLE TO DELIVER ON LOEB'S BRILLIANCE

gamesTMmag scored 6 for *Sébastien Loeb Rally Evo*
Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**

RISE UP OR GET RETRO



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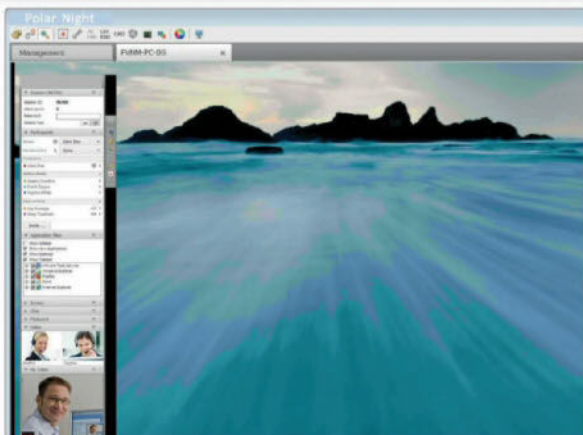
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THE VIKING-'EM-UP HEADS TO CONSOLES

The Banner Saga

Above: Each unit has a health gauge and an armour gauge. It's important to deplete both of them because while emptying their health will obviously kill them, the more armour they have, the more likely you'll miss when you attack them.

If you missed it the first time around, which is highly likely, **The Banner Saga** is a tactical RPG with a Viking setting, telling the tale of a wandering army on a quest to defeat the warring Dredge race and figure out a way to kill its seemingly immortal leader. Rather than focusing on a main hero, the entire army of warriors is presented as a single entity travelling and fighting as a group; as you travel through the various lands you're also responsible for ensuring the well-being of the group via a number of CYOA style decisions.

The game is beautifully presented, with orchestral music and hand-drawn animations making it look like the sort of thing you'd have seen in a grand animated movie from the pre-CG era. The battle sections are similarly stylised, though making use of the game's zoom feature to better identify units results in disappointingly blurry sprites.

Still, the proof is in the playing and for the most part its tactical turn-based system is solid, offering a few novelty mechanics

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC, iOS, Android
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Versus Evil
DEVELOPER: Stoic
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

like larger characters who take up multiple squares on the map and the ability to use forceful attacks to move enemy units to different spaces. Unfortunately, the move from PC to console has resulted in a poor control system, with confusing and fiddly combinations of D-pad and analogue selection leading to numerous frustrating moments that would never surface were you playing with a mouse instead.

Not all its niggles are exclusive to the console version: a few other general bugbears are carried over from the Steam release. The story can still be overbearing to begin with, throwing a deluge of character names at you with little exposition and expecting you to piece together who's who and what's going on over time. The lack of variety in hero and enemy types also means that by the time you reach the last three or four hours of the campaign you're essentially going through

the motions and no longer expecting to see anything new or exciting.

Despite these drawbacks, *The Banner Saga* is still a solid tactical RPG with a

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FACTIONS: Since it's two years since the PC release we'd hoped the console version would have offered more: maybe including the online multiplayer spin-off *The Banner Saga Factions* would have added replay value.

charming art style and a story that, while initially daunting, eventually becomes manageable and memorable. Because it suffers a little

from trying to fit

a controller-shaped peg into a mouse-shaped hole, the console port isn't quite as satisfying as the original Steam version (which is also usually cheaper), but if it's your only option you'll still find plenty of beautifully-designed RPG goodness to keep you going.

VERDICT

A BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY WITH A FEW STUMBLERS

7

gamesTMag scored 7 for
The Banner Saga

Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



Below: In between battles your party will travel from location to location, encountering various incidents along the way. These are handled in a multiple choice style and your party's wellbeing is affected as a result, similar to 80s classic *The Oregon Trail*.



HOW MANY TIMES CAN ONE GAME DISAPPOINT?

Resident Evil Zero HD

There will never be another *Resident Evil* game quite like this. For those of you still clinging deliriously onto the days of retro past, that'll be a tough pill to swallow. But for the rest of us, *Resident Evil Zero HD* offers a bittersweet opportunity to realise that, while the franchise isn't in great shape now, it wasn't fairing much better at the turn of the century either.

That's partly down to *Resident Evil Zero HD* standing as a shimmering testament to how much we take for granted in modern videogame design. Just as it did back in 2002, everything about *Zero HD* feels like a horrible hangover from the Nineties. It forces players to quickly develop a tolerance to its eccentricities and archaic systems, with those that choose not to adapt quickly swallowed into gaping a maw of tedium.

Capcom might have done a stellar job with the basics – *Zero HD* looks great, thanks to improved lighting and updated textures, but the studio hasn't made any

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC, Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



critical updates to the core-gameplay experience or the deeper underlying problems from the past.

From the finicky inventory system, constantly striving to undermine the dual-protagonists unique characteristics; the stilted and laboured combat mechanics, that seem to dissipate tension at every (fixed camera) turn; to the gluttonous six hours campaign that's far to overwrought for its own good, *Resident Evil Zero* might have all the hallmarks and trappings of a classic entry, but its biggest failing is that it's simply unable to generate any semblance of excitement or curiosity around its premise. At times it borders on self-parody, with Capcom parading its ridiculous cast of characters, story and voice acting out in front of players with wild abandon. But *Resident Evil Zero* isn't smart enough to pull this attitude off purposefully, and the subsequent result is *Zero HD* standing

as a perfectly preserved mausoleum to everything Capcom once held sacred.

Zero HD is a gorgeous, well-updated memorial to what we once believed was the pinnacle of survival horror game design. But, as we discovered the first time around, *Resident Evil Zero* became the catalyst for change; its critical and commercial failings inspiring a shift towards the action-led

drama of *Resident Evil 4*. The question of why Capcom even bothered with this HD remaster does beg to be raised, because while it might look

like a modern release it certainly doesn't play like one. It's time that might have been better spent on something else.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

GRAPHICAL FIDELITY: The updated textures really help bring the pre-rendered backdrops to life in ways the Gamecube never quite achieved.

VERDICT

IMPRESSIVE REMASTER TO A MEDIOCRE GAME

gamesTMmag scored **5** for *Resident Evil Zero HD*
Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



While *Zero* does provide a decent lead in to the events of *Resident Evil*, there's really very little substance to this critical miss-step in the franchise. It highlights the reasons why Capcom thought it necessary to ditch survival horror in favour of action.



Left: Religion is a core tenet in *That Dragon, Cancer*, and – even for those who don't believe – it does a good job of showing how people use their faith in times of crisis, drawing an inner strength from their beliefs.

WROUGHT, POWERFUL AND TOUGH TO SCORE

That Dragon, Cancer

Being surrounded by games that promote and encourage death as an end result for so many years, it comes as a stark, harsh blow to the emotional centre when playing something that makes one life matter so very much.

That Dragon, Cancer tells the story of Joel Green: an infant given months to live after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, who went on to live to the age of five before passing away. It was created by Joel's parents, along with his young brothers, and is a difficult experience – one many will actively, understandably, choose to avoid.

Those who do soldier on will end up able to share in a fraction of a percent of the pain, grief and joy the Green family went through during the short life of their son/brother. Playing out in a series of interactive scenes, mostly using just the mouse, the two-hour story weaves together narration, audiovisual cues and – importantly – elements specific to gaming to craft the fairly abstract, deeply imaginative narrative. It makes clever use of a player's agency both to progress through things and

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Numinous Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 1.80GHz dual core processor, 2GB RAM, video card with 512MB VRAM, 5GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

to help the player sympathise with Joel and the rest of the family's plight. Being forced to walk away from a hospital bed-bound child isn't something we will forget any time soon.

At the same time, the fits and spurts of happiness – innocent, pure joy, say, or a family coming together in support of their youngest member – hit just as hard as the sheer, despondent sadness. The couple of hours it takes can feel like a lifetime, and in one very unfortunate way are just that.

It's absolutely fair – right, even – to say that not everyone will feel *That Dragon, Cancer* is a positive experience overall. From the base-level 'this isn't a game' complaints to those pushed back – or outright angered – by the deep-seated Christian faith that runs through to the title's very foundations, there are legitimate, personal, reasons to avoid it. But that's the thing: this is a very personal project; a tale

told from the perspective of a single family. Making it a third-person cover shooter would be absurd, and ignoring the religion these family members share – and draw courage from – would be an outright lie.

To put a score at the end of a review of an experience like this is to distil such an emotive and personal experience into

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HONESTY: Games are often escapism. *That Dragon, Cancer*, while abstract in many ways, is a very straightforward, honest retelling of a pain most people will never even come close to knowing.

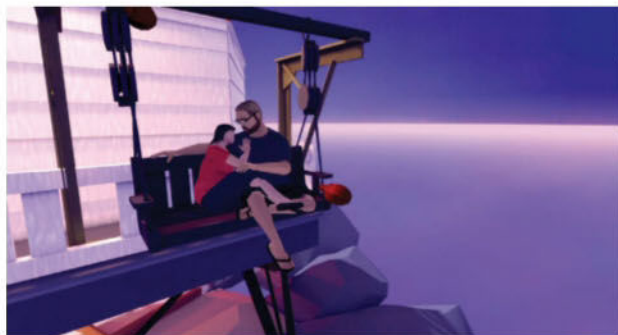
an easily-digestible digit. It means very little for *That Dragon, Cancer*. All that needs to be known is this is a beautiful, affecting and emotionally challenging title

that acts as a truly fine love letter and monument to a lost loved one. It will open eyes and it will help people with their very real grief, and because of that it is a success.

VERDICT

A GENUINELY AFFECTING LOVE LETTER

gamesTMag scored 8 for
That Dragon, Cancer
Follow our scores on **JUST A SCORE**



Above: Mother and father, Amy and Ryan Green, are present throughout *That Dragon, Cancer*. Each narrated their in-game character, reliving the pain, joy, hope and despair they had already lived through in a very real way. It is, sometimes, very raw.



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WHY I



STREET FIGHTER II

NICOLL HUNT, CREATOR OF FIST OF AWESOME, I FIGHT BEARS

66 I'm going to go with the game that did, in many ways, change my life, and that's Street Fighter II on the SNES. That game for me solidified everything that I love about computer games. It's got people punching other people in the face, it's got an awesome soundtrack, and it was an awesome excuse for all my friends to get together and have mini tournaments in our bedrooms. I absolutely fell in love with that game. It's the first game that I got so obsessed with that it got to the point where I just analysed every single frame of the attack. Even now, when I'm playing Street Fighter IV and V, I'm not bad at them... but with Street Fighter II, I was a god - it was the greatest feeling in the world.



50000

KO

79

KEN

**“It was an awesome
excuse for all my friends
to get together and have
mini tournaments in
our bedrooms”**

**NICOLL HUNT, CREATOR/DEVELOPER,
I FIGHT BEARS**





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RETRO

NO.171



104

RETRO GUIDE TO...

AMIGA 500

The personal computer that spawned a whole new way to experience games, we reflect on the very best it had to offer



BEHIND THE SCENES

112 DUKE NUKEM 64

Neutered, trimmed, cleaned up and simplified; how did this Nintendo-friendly Duke outing turn out to be one of his very best?



RETRO INTERVIEW

118 JON HARE

We chat with the *Sensible Soccer* creator about his proposed spiritual successor, independent development and his years making great games



GAME CHANGERS

122 DIABLO

How one roleplaying game with a simple dungeon-building system went on to define the modern world of western RPGs

DISCUSS

Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum

www.gamestm.co.uk/forum

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... AMIGA 500



Commodore's Amiga range was host to some truly fantastic games, but how many of these classics did you experience?

AFTER DOMINATING THE 8-bit home computer market with the Commodore 64, Commodore was keen to replicate the success going forward. The Amiga 1000 launched in 1985, but wasn't really considered a games machine, mainly due to its high price point, which kept it out of reach of many gamers. The introduction of the budget-based Amiga 500 in 1987 helped bring the Amiga to the wider paying public, which ensured developers quickly started flocking to the system. In October 1989, Commodore International's David Pleasance put together one of the most popular Amiga bundles of all time. The *Batman* pack not only featured the titular game, but also included the computer and a modulator, *The New Zealand Story*, *Interceptor* and *Deluxe Paint 2*, all for the staggeringly low price of £399.

The Amiga 500's success soon soared and it became host to a whole array of fantastic games across a wide range of genres,

including *Sensible World Of Soccer*, *The Chaos Engine*, *Worms* and many, many more. Companies like Sensible Software, The Bitmap Brothers, Ocean Software, Cinemaware and LucasArts would all thrive on the machine, and it ended up becoming one of the best-selling systems in the Amiga range. Numerous systems would follow, including the 500+, 600, 32-bit 1200 and even a console called the CD32, but none of them were ever able to truly match the success of the Amiga 500. Even today, the Amiga 500 is seen by many as the definitive gaming Amiga (although those with their upgraded 1200s would most likely disagree).

With that in mind, we've decided to focus on those games that are playable on Commodore's most popular computer. Oh, and we've tried to keep it as balanced as possible to ensure as many different genres are represented as possible, so don't be surprised if the odd classic is missing.



IK+ 1988

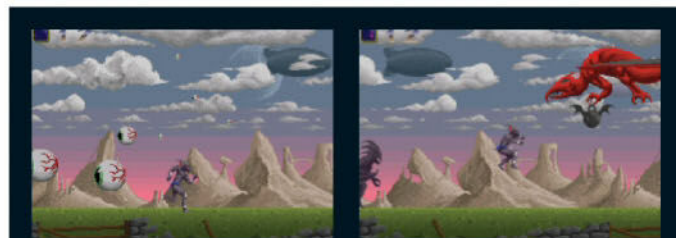
ARCHER MACLEAN

■ It may be a port of the classic Commodore 64 game but Archer Maclean's *IK+* remains the best one-on-one-on-one fighter for Commodore's 16-bit system. Designed around a standard joystick, it features a great array of moves, amazingly fluid combat and you can drop everyone's trousers by pressing the T key. Unlike virtually all its peers, *IK+* adds a third fighter to the mix, ensuring the bouts are always tense and exciting as you're always kept busy by the challenging AI.

CARRIER COMMAND 1988

RAINBIRD

■ *Carrier Command* caused many jaws to drop upon its release in 1988. It not only delivered astonishing 3D visuals, but had gameplay that was just as state of the art. Effectively two games in one thanks to its Strategy and Action modes, *Carrier Command* allowed you to commandeer a gigantic robotic aircraft carrier and complete a variety of challenging missions. It's notable for an incredibly slick icon-driven UI and immense playing area.



SHADOW OF THE BEAST 1989

REFLECTIONS

■ While *Shadow Of The Beast* is one of the weakest games in this list, it's nonetheless an incredibly important one, being one of the first to truly push the power of Commodore's 16-bit micro. A sensational haunting score combined with amazing parallax scrolling to create what was essentially a very cool tech demo.



BATMAN THE MOVIE 1989

OCEAN SOFTWARE

■ Ocean's *Batman* was another early system seller and was based on Tim Burton's hit movie. In addition to featuring excellent audio and slick samples, it's most memorable due to the stunning 3D Batmobile and Batwing sections that helped separate the Amiga from its 8-bit peers. The core platforming is fun too, with Batman being able to utilise a useful grappling hook.



STUNT CAR RACER 1989

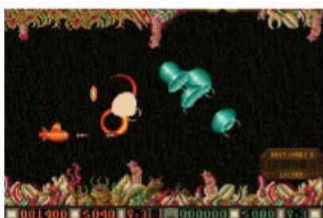
MICROSTYLE

■ Geoff Crammond loves racing games, and he loves physics. He combined his two passions to create the insanely fun *Stunt Car Racer*, a highly enjoyable racing game that takes place on crazy elevated tracks. It's essentially a slightly more serious take on Sega's excellent arcade racer *Power Drift*, but still remains highly entertaining, particularly when linked up to another Amiga. It remains great fun on your own too, thanks to some challenging AI racers.

IT CAME FROM THE DESERT 1989

CINEMAWARE

■ While *Defender Of The Crown* was a fantastic calling card for Cinemaware, it was *It Came From The Desert* that cemented the company as one of the Amiga's most exciting developers. Inspired by classic B-movies of the Fifties, the aim was to protect the town of Lizard Breath from invading giant ants. Killer graphics, a great script and some entertaining mini-games made for a very potent adventure.



BLOOD MONEY 1989

DMA DESIGN

■ Before it found success with *GTA*, DMA Design was making entertaining blasters like *Blood Money*. Inspired by numerous arcade games, it's a truly competent blaster where you can play as a jet, helicopter, submarine or a spaceman, blasting enemies, collecting coins and buying power-ups. Graphically superb with an equally stunning soundtrack.

POPULOUS 1989

BULLFROG

■ *Populous* not only put Bullfrog on the map, but also introduced the world to the genius of Peter Molyneux. Free of the hype that would burden his later games, *Populous* helped popularise the god sim, allowing you to build up an army of followers using a clever icon-driven interface.



SPEEDBALL 2: BRUTAL DELUXE 1990

THE BITMAP BROTHERS

■ Ice cream! Ice cream! Many consider *Speedball 2* to be one of the finest sports games of all time and we'd be hard-pressed to argue with them. This futuristic sports game has you trying to score as many points as possible in 180 seconds. Its Tournament mode is superb, but it's the gripping two-player mode that has led to many a broken joystick.

"POPULOUS HELPED POPULARISE THE GOD SIM, ALLOWING YOU TO BUILD AN ARMY OF FOLLOWERS"

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND 1990

LUCASFILM GAMES

■ Guybrush Threepwood's quest to become a mighty pirate resulted in one of LucasFilm's most beloved games and arguably one of the greatest point-and-click adventures ever made. It enhances the SCUMM engine, is far funnier than *Manic Mansion* and is filled with delightful characters, including one of the smarriest salesmen you're ever likely to meet in a game. It was succeeded by the far superior *Monkey Island 2*, but the large number of disks that game required (11 to the original's 4) means we're sticking with the original.



LOTUS ESPRIT TURBO CHALLENGE 1990

MAGNETIC FIELDS

■ It's succeeded by two equally good sequels, but purists opt for Gremlin's first game. It's a wonderful arcade racer spread across 32 challenging tracks and three difficulty levels. While it's a brilliant single player experience, the split screen mode is sublime, allowing for plenty of satisfying competitive racing.



SUPREMACY 1990

PROBE SOFTWARE

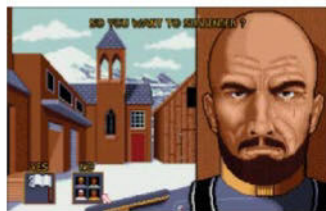
■ An excellent game by coder Dave Perry and easily the best space strategy game on Amiga. There are four distinctive alien races to beat, a cluster of planets to seize control of and a whole variety of ways to take them. It's all tied together by an intuitive control system and daunting 90-page manual.



MIDWINTER 1990

RAINBIRD

■ Not content with cramming a gigantic game world into the humble Spectrum with *The Lords Of Midnight*, Mike Singleton's 16-bit debut was even more ambitious. Set in an apocalyptic future where snow covers the world, *Midwinter* is full of neat touches, including managing 32 recruits (all with background bios that affect how they interact with other characters) a variety of ways to navigate the world and injuries to different body parts. It's a little clunky to play nowadays, but its scope is still dazzling.



PANG 1990

OCEAN SOFTWARE

■ With so many great Amiga conversions we're brutally cropping them back to include only the best. One such example is the incredible port of the arcade classic *Pang* (or *Buster Bros* depending on where you live). It's virtually an arcade perfect port, with the aim of the game being to burst bubbles until the playing area is clear. Of course, the bubbles constantly divide, meaning things get hectic very quickly, particularly when a second player gets involved.

"TENSE DOGFIGHTS AND EXCELLENT PHYSICS ENSURE THE GAMEPLAY ALWAYS REMAINS RIVETING"



F-19 STEALTH FIGHTER 1990

MPS LABS

■ Yes it's insanely complicated to get to grips with, but once it all clicks *F-19* becomes the Amiga's best flight sim. Graphically it's superb, while the varied missions, tense dogfights and excellent physics ensure the gameplay always remains riveting. As with many sims of the time it shipped with useful keyboard overlays.

RAINBOW ISLANDS 1990

GRAFTGOLD

■ Virtually every Graftgold conversion of *Rainbow Islands* was superb, but the Amiga's is one of the best. It contains virtually every aspect of the rainbow-flinging platformer, has extremely authentic visuals and wonderfully tight controls. It also does a brilliant job of converting the arcade games clever scoring system and has a delightfully chipper soundtrack.



MIKE MONTGOMERY TALKS SPEEDBALL 2

How The Bitmap Brothers made its killer sequel



How did *Brutal Deluxe* improve on the original *Speedball*?

I think the whole concept of

Speedball 2 was different. What we wanted to do with *Speedball 2* was all of the things that we really didn't have time to do with *Speedball*. So the viewpoint was slightly changed, the graphics were a lot better – it was a different game to a certain extent, wasn't it? I think *Speedball 2* was just a natural progression.

How did it compare to the Atari ST version?

The frame-rate was a lot better and that was important because the better it was, the better the game experience of that type of game would be. It wouldn't matter for a turn-based game, but with an action game, you needed to be slick and quick.

Tell us about the scoring system.

The basic scoring methods and warp gates were inspired by *Pro Pinball*. In fact, a lot is based on

a pinball machine, really. We just thought it would be a good idea to do something different and to say this is not a football game. We wanted something that had virtually no rules with a scoring mechanism that would let you boost your points, which is where the multiplier and bounce domes came in.

Why do you think the game remains popular?

In football, you may get a corner and you need to score off of it, in *Speedball*, you could be in a tight position with a few seconds left, go for a bounce dome and bang, you've won the game. It's what made the game exciting and it's why people still play it. I mean, two years ago I was on the Underground in London, and two guys were talking about *Speedball 2* on the Amiga and it was, like, fuck! I would have told them that I made the game but it was too packed and I had to get off, but I heard this conversation and it was, like, fucking hell, people still talk very passionately about it.



CAPTIVE 1990

MINDSCAPE

■ It would be easy to dismiss *Captive* as a futuristic *Dungeon Master* clone, but that does it a disservice. There are a large number of planets to discover and land on, indoor and outdoor locations and dangerous monsters to fight.



WINGS 1990

CINEMAWARE

■ This excellent Cinemaware game puts you in the shoes of a trainee biplane pilot during the World War 1. It not only features some intense dogfighting and a good array of mini-games, but also has a surprisingly poignant story. It was ported to both the GBA in 2002 and had an enhanced update created via Kickstarter.



SUPER CARS II 1991

MAGNETIC FIELDS

■ The Amiga excelled when it came to top-down racers, but this is easily our favourite. It builds on the original with a great array of weapons, and adds a much-needed and brilliant split screen two-player mode. Graphically, it's been enhanced too, making it one of the slickest looking racers on the system.



EYE OF THE BEHOLDER II: THE LEGEND OF DARKMOON 1991

WESTWOOD STUDIOS

■ Westwood had already wowed Amiga owners by improving on *Dungeon Master* with the original *EOTB*, here it made both games a distant memory. Greatly improved graphics, densely populated dungeons and a huge array of terrifying monsters all combined to create a vastly superior sequel. Original *EOTB* owners could carry their party across too, ensuring fantastic continuity for those that loved the original. Great use of the D&D rules too.



JIMMY WHITE'S WHIRLWIND SNOOKER 1991

ARCHER MACLEAN

■ A snooker game may sound boring, but Maclean's certainly wasn't. In addition to featuring stunning physics, clever coding tricks meant Maclean's game was far faster than other examples. It's funny too, with a lovely sense of humour such as the balls that mock you if you take too long to set up a shot.

FURRY AND FABULOUS



Mike Dailly looks back at *Lemmings*

What was the most difficult aspect of creating *Lemmings*?

There were a few issues. Making the lemmings walk and move exactly, binding feet to ground rather than sliding, actually getting collision working on a pixel basis was tricky – and in fact, *Lemmings* never worked totally for 'steel' things. On console it was a nightmare of the highest order. The five-screen bitmap was utterly horrible, and I am still amazed they managed to port it to the Game Boy!

Lemmings is known for its difficulty. Did any of the levels keep you puzzled for ages?

Nope. By the time we were churning out levels, we were all so very good at it, we could solve any level in seconds – pretty much. The only tricky bit was actually doing the level, but even then most would be solved in only a few attempts.

Which of your levels is your favourite and why?

It's Hero Time is my all-time favourite, because it had a little bit

of lateral thinking, and was far from obvious as to how you do it. Lots of people – including testers at Psygnosis – got utterly stumped on it, which makes me happy.



With the benefit of hindsight, is there anything about *Lemmings* that you would have done differently at all?

Tech-wise, *Lemmings 2* solved everything as far as console went, but game-wise... it would have been nice with a background.

Have you ever had any memorable interactions with *Lemmings* fans?

We would occasionally get sent odd *Lemmings* items. Pillows, drawings – even wood carvings! I do meet some at shows, and that's always fun. What gets me most though, is the love of the game even after all this time. Seeing weird *Lemmings* 'things' happening – like the group that walked around a computer show one after the other dressed as lemmings – being blockers and the like. That makes me smile!

ANOTHER WORLD 1991

ERIC CHAHI

■ Many gave up after their encounter with that first cat-like alien, but those that persevered with Chahi's game were treated to an incredibly cinematic experience. The atmosphere throughout is superb as scientist Lester Knight Chaykin forms an uneasy alliance with an alien and tries to escape the hostile planet he's found himself on. Its difficulty and abstractness will delight and annoy in equal measure.



FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX 1991

MICROPROSE SOFTWARE

■ Even if you're not an F1 fan it's hard not to be impressed by Geoff Crammond's astonishing racer. Driving assists, incredibly accurate tracks, sensational real-world physics and the ability to tweak numerous aspects of your car made Crammond's game feel incredibly different to other racers of the time. It looked sensational too, thanks to an amazingly polished 3D engine.

**MOONSTONE:
A HARD DAY'S
KNIGHT 1991****MINDSCAPE**

■ This bloody masterpiece never gets enough love. A combination of turn-based and real time combat with neat RPG mechanics, Mindscape's game has up to four players competing as rival knights to retrieve the fabled Moonstone. An excellent adventure enhanced by its over-the-top gore that makes every fight a vicious bloodbath.

**LEMMINGS 1991****DMA DESIGN**

■ *Lemmings* don't participate in mass suicide, as it was revealed that Disney's award-winning documentary *White Wilderness* was faked. The notion stuck however, and led to this wildly clever puzzle game that had you trying to save as many foolhardy lemmings as possible. While the tunes are delightful, it's the clever level design that makes DMA Design's game such a joy to play.

TURRICAN II: THE FINAL FIGHT 1991**FACTOR 5**

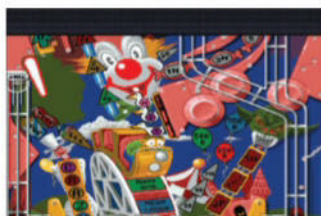
■ Playing like a cross between *Metroid* and *Psycho-Nics*, *Turrican II* is one of the best run-and-guns on the Amiga, delivering sensational visuals, a stunning score and hectic gameplay. The five worlds are huge in scope, while it features some truly gigantic bosses and a satisfying array of weapons. It appeared on consoles (greatly cut down) as a movie tie-in for *Universal Soldier*.

**WIZKID 1992****SENSIBLE SOFTWARE**

■ Whereas *Wizball* was an unconventional shoot-em-up, *Wizkid* is a nutty take on the platform/puzzle genre. The player must clear each screen by using Wizkid's disembodied head to knock objects onto enemies. It's harder than it sounds, but works thanks to its irrelevant sense of humour and excellent controls.

**CIVILIZATION 1992****MPS LABS**

■ Sid Meier's strategy game had you playing through time itself, building vast empires across a series of important time periods in an attempt to win the great space race. It's not the most accessible of games, but it's arguably the Amiga's best example of the genre.

**"MISTAKEN AS A SEQUEL TO
ANOTHER WORLD, FLASHBACK IS
VERY MUCH ITS OWN GAME"****PINBALL FANTASIES 1992****DIGITAL ILLUSIONS**

■ Before it rose to dominance with *Battlefield*, DICE made a trio of excellent pinball games. The middle child, *Pinball Fantasies*, is easily the best, thanks to great variety across its four tables, exceptionally smooth scrolling and marvellous physics. They're not as interactive as today's efforts, but it remains an exceptionally well designed score chaser.

FLASHBACK 1992**DELPHINE SOFTWARE**

■ Mistaken as a sequel to *Another World*, *Flashback* is very much its own game. While Conrad B Heart's adventure is just as cinematic, it's more arcade-based than *Another World*, with a bigger emphasis on platforming and a lovely tribute to *The Running Man*.





DUNE II 1993

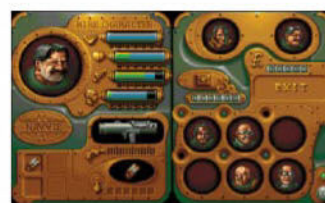
WESTWOOD STUDIOS

■ Although not the first RTS, it helped popularise the genre and laid the building blocks for the later *Command & Conquer*, which was also by Westwood. Initially you simply harvest Arrakis for spice while fighting over the odd attack. Once the other houses arrive you then start using your spice-powered army to capture your opponents.

SYNDICATE 1993

BULLFROG

■ Only a Peter Molyneux game would have a weapon where you can persuade enemies not to fight you. As you expect from a Bullfrog production the gameplay is of an incredibly high standard and has your squad of cyborg agents pulling off complex missions in a stunning isometric environment.



THE CHAOS ENGINE 1993

THE BITMAP BROTHERS

■ This excellent top-down shooter was known in the U.S. as *Soldiers Of Fortune*. Spread across four gigantic worlds, it's designed for two players (with the computer controlling the AI in a single player game) and has you seeking out keys while mowing down a never ending supply of enemies.



RUFF 'N' TUMBLE 1994

WUNDERKIND

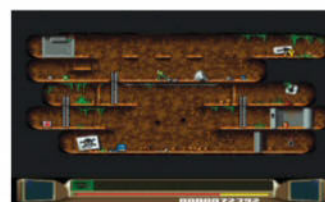
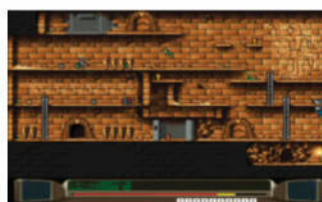
■ Imagine if you could play a game where you completed stages by collecting different coloured marbles. Now imagine that you had a range of exotic weaponry and could shoot metallic owls in the face with said weapons. Well imagine no longer, simply play this excellent run-and-gun while marvelling at its frenetic gameplay and excellent visuals.



KING'S QUEST VI: HEIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW 1994

SIERRA ONLINE

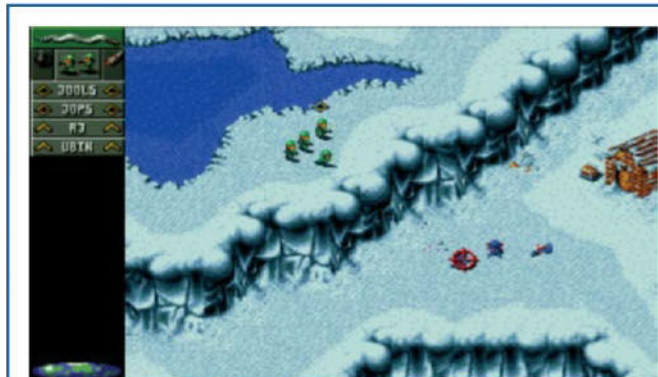
■ It comes on an eye-watering ten disks, but this is still the best game in the series for many. Converted by Revolution Software this was Sierra's last Amiga game and the first by Jane Jensen. It went out on a high though, thanks to a great sense of humour, strong script and numerous endings to discover.



BENEFACTOR 1994

DIGITAL ILLUSIONS

■ While it appears to be nothing more than a simple *Lemmings* clone, Benefactor is anything but. Players control Ben E Factor, a humble saviour who must run around picking up keys and tripping switches so he can guide his merry men to safety. It starts off easy, but later levels soon become insanely difficult and require good dexterity and careful thinking to master.



CANNON FODDER 1993

SENSIBLE SOFTWARE

■ Clouded by unfair controversy at the time, Sensible Software's game remains a timeless classic. Players must navigate the maze-like stages taking down enemies with a fragile squad of soldiers. The mouse-driven gameplay is exceptionally intuitive, while it's laced with Sensible Software's warped sense of humour. A sequel followed in 1994 (we like to pretend the third game never happened).



THE SETTLERS 1993

BLUE BYTE

■ This excellent strategy game has you building medieval settlements and fighting off an aggressive AI opponent. As with *Sim City* (which just missed inclusion), the key placement of buildings and road networks is crucial to the efficiency of your settlement, *The Settlers* stands apart however thanks to its military element, allowing you to capture more territory. The series is still going strong today, with *Settlers 8* due shortly.

FRONTIER: ELITE II 1993

GAMETEK

■ *Frontier* was an incredibly ambitious sequel. In addition to being the first game to feature procedurally generated star systems, it also did the same with textures and terrain. It offers unparalleled freedom too, thanks to its open-ended and lack of pre-scripted missions. A sequel followed in 1995, but was riddled with bugs.



JON HARE ON HIS BEAUTIFUL GAME

The secret to *Sensible World Of Soccer*'s success



How did SWOS originate?

After *Sensible Soccer* came out in 1992, we didn't stop working on it. Our programmer, Chris Chapman, ensured the development process was never broken. So as he carried on working, we were able to inject more features and work on a game that really would become the ultimate football game, in our eyes at least. That's how *Sensible World Of Soccer* came into being.

Why were there so many clubs and players?

We were very thorough, and that is because of the roots which go back to *Subbuteo*. That game was international and it had different kits. You had all the different international teams and I think *SWOS* was an ideal way of just turning our game into a modern *Subbuteo* on a computer, not in the sense of flicking players around but playing football as realistically as possible, given the constraints. I think that that was probably part of it. Personally, I'm quite attracted to things that are about the world and different countries, and how that

works, and it was nice to map the football world out of the game.

Why add the player management element?

What we wanted with the management part was a change to buying players and selling them so that whatever team you were – whether Rochdale, Aldershot or whatever – then you'd be able to buy players and stick them in your team and see what happened. It was fun to have that ability and buy a player from, say, Venezuela and see if he worked.

Why did you not massively overhaul the original game engine?

Chris always said he didn't quite know how we'd gotten to that point of getting a good engine but he didn't want to mess it up, so we were always quite careful to not play around with our magic formula too much. There was more focus on interfacing the tactics properly with the gameplay so it was well balanced and also well balanced on the AI. The strategy, the AI, and the controls were a triangle and we had to make sure they all balanced with each other.



BENEATH A STEEL SKY 1994

REVOLUTION SOFTWARE

■ Before it found success with *Broken Sword*, Revolution Software created this gem of a point-and-click adventure. Charles Cecil teamed up with comic book artist Dave Gibbons to create his dystopian take on Australia and made great use of dialogue trees to enhance *Sky's* bleak atmosphere. Be warned though as it utilises 15 disks!

THEME PARK 1994

BULLFROG

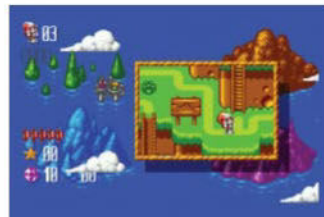
■ There are numerous simulation games on the Amiga, but few match *Theme Park*. Building the park can be a puzzle in itself, as you manage queues, choose key positions for rides and alter the salt level on your chips to ensure maximum returns. Once the park finally opens it becomes a frantic juggling act to stay on top.



MR NUTZ: HOPPIN MAD 1994

NEON

■ Along with *Superfrog* this is probably the best platformer on the Amiga. It plays very much like *Sonic* (in fact it's rumoured to have started off as a *Sonic* port) with superfast scrolling and plenty of items to collect. It stands apart however due to its strange, but oddly compelling adventure style intros at the beginning of each stage.



WORMS 1995

TEAM 17

■ Like *Angry Birds*, *Worms* took a well established genre, but married it to an insanely cute theme. The end result not only propelled coder Andy Davidson into the limelight, but gave Team 17 its strongest franchise. Controlling a group of warring weapons-trained annelids might not sound fun, but it really is. The ultimate Amiga party game.

UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN 1995

CLIMAX



■ This thoroughly absorbing strategy game from Julian Gollop explains why he's one of the masters of the genre. It subtly builds on all the mechanics he introduced in his earlier eight-bit gems and offers a staggering amount of depth in its combat. It's far superior on later Amiga systems, but we couldn't bear to leave it out. A true classic.

SENSIBLE WORLD OF SOCCER 95/96 EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION 1995

SENSIBLE SOFTWARE

■ We've chosen the *European Championship* update as it greatly improved the gameplay and added better menus. It's otherwise *Sensible Soccer* but with greatly refined mechanics and useful additions like star ratings for players and stronger AI. The career mode remains *SWOS's* highlight though, allowing you to manage your team through 20 gruelling seasons.



BEHIND THE SCENES

DUKE NUKEM 64

Guts, guns and gore – but no nudity, sex or swearing.

When Duke Nukem appeared on the Nintendo 64,
the censors' scissors were out in force



Released: 1997

Format: Nintendo 64

Publisher: GT Interactive

Software

Key Staff: Rick Raymo

(producer), Ashley Finney (lead

programmer), Simon Mills

(graphics), Steve Bamford

(graphics), Nick Dry (graphics),

Neil Baldwin (audio), Steve

Duckworth (audio)



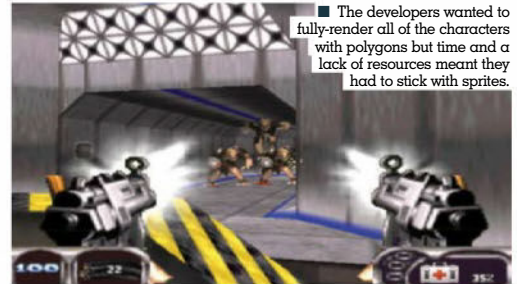
Ashley Finney would later work on an array of James Bond titles.

SIMON MILLS' VERY FIRST TASK AS A PROFESSIONAL GAMES PROGRAMMER AT THE BRITISH DEVELOPER EUROCOM DID NOT REQUIRE HIM TO DILIGENTLY TAP AWAY AT HIS KEYBOARD NOR COME UP WITH ANY NEW AND IMAGINATIVE CODING TRICKS. Rather, he was handed a pad of A4 paper and a pen, and he was asked to play through *Duke Nukem 3D* in its entirety. It was up to him to figure out which bits were of particularly poor taste and note down the most controversial moments.

As tasks go, it was rather time consuming given there were a good number of them. But that was no secret. The *Doom*-esque first-person shooter had stormed on to the PC in 1996, plunging players into a bloodbath of ultra-violence while washing them with ripples of naked flesh thanks to an abundance of strippers. Held together by the impressive BUILD Engine, which was produced by teenager Ken Silverman, the game had potty-mouthed quips from a lead character who embodied the combined personas of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger. There were lots of Pig Cops with LARD emblazoned on their jackets and imprisoned "babes" to shoot.

Mills' pad, as you'd expect, quickly filled up. "I'd only just started at Eurocom so I guess they wanted to give me something to do," Mills says of the job. But his role was of great importance. Work had just begun on a Nintendo 64 port of *Duke Nukem 3D* and there was a stark understanding that the Japanese giant had set boundaries, which could not be crossed. "We had to self-censor the game for a Nintendo 64 release because we knew it would never be published on that platform if we didn't," Mills recalls. The trick was to sanitise the game while ensuring it retained a similar level of thrills.

Some months earlier, the very idea that the game could be picked apart in such a way had enraged George Broussard. As the president of 3D Realms – the maker of the original game – he had told N64.com that he expected Nintendo to remove certain aspects of the game but he added: "We're not going to be very happy about it, and we're probably not going to bend to it." He had threatened to go public if there were any attempts to force alternations, saying they would make things "so messy for them that they are not going to want to do that."



The developers wanted to fully-render all of the characters with polygons but time and a lack of resources meant they had to stick with sprites.



There was an exciting and welcome two-player co-op mode which would be played via a split screen.

RICK RAYMO WAS VERY MUCH PUSHING FOR THINGS TO BE CHANGED

But Eurocom and GT Interactive Software – which was publishing the game – would start making those decisions themselves, understanding that months of inevitable hard work would otherwise be in vain. "Our producer Rick Raymo was very much pushing for things to be changed," says Mills, his list having been studied in great detail. "I'm not quite sure how keen 3D Realms was – I got the impression that they weren't too keen on it – but Raymo would push for things to be different so we were able to change things around a bit."

The alterations fell to a very talented in-house team. Chief among them was Ashley Finney, the project's lead programmer, who had just completed some initial conversion work on *WarGods* getting its 3D rendering running. He was proving to be a dab hand when it came to arcade conversions, having the likes of *Super Street Fighter II Turbo* under his belt and he had been the first to start work on *Duke Nukem 64*.

"A couple of us had flown out to Providence to meet Ken Silverman and get a copy of the *Duke Nukem 3D* code by hand," Finney tells us. "Ken was a really nice guy, he fed us homemade soup, we played on his Galaga machine and took a quiz on the shapes of the States of America. He gave us the code on a 3.5 inch floppy disk and we flew home."

Finney's first job was to look at *Duke Nukem 3D*'s file format. "I reversed engineered the binary and wrote something that would build true 3D polygon meshes of the map in realtime," he says. When Mills joined him – the pair operating from a spacious room under a stairwell at the back of Eurocom's offices – the work was divided up. "I removed the game code from the rendering code so that Ash would work on getting the actual rendering engine working," says Mills.



The cinema in the first levels was showing *Uranus Attacks* rather than *Attack of the Bleached Blonde Bike Bimbos* as in the PC version.

CONTROLLING THE DUKE

With no keyboard to hand, Eurocom had to think hard about controls



ANYONE WHO HAS seen the PC version of *Duke Nukem 3D* will know that it was a complex game to control. It could be played using a joystick, mouse, gamepad or keyboard with the latter utilising more than 50 keys for various options, whether it was to call up 2D maps, auto run, select weapons or centering the view. As you can imagine, the N64 controller had none of that breadth.

Yet for Ashley Finney, there were no headaches. "I don't remember any problems", he says. But that may be down to the team "borrowing" ideas from another, similar game. "We more or less nicked the controls from *Turok*", Simon Mills freely admits. "We felt that's what the controls should be." Even so, it wasn't the easiest game to control. Many reviewers and gamers picked up on that although with a lot of practice, it started to become second nature.

■■■■ A tap of the left shoulder button allowed players to use an item from their inventory,

■■■■ The R-button was used as a "shift" key and, in combination with other buttons, could be used for activation, or the selection of weapons and inventory items. It could also be used to jump, fly or swim.

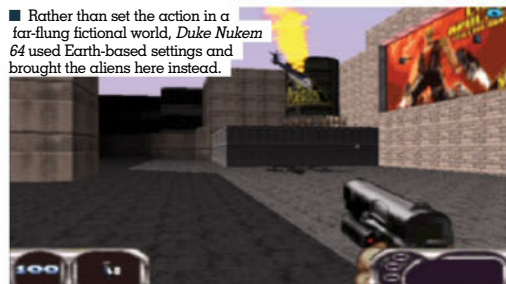
■■■■ When the Control Stick Move Mode was actioned, players could use this stick to get around the environment otherwise it would just allow for looking around.

■■■■ The D-pad would always allow you to select an inventory item but its secondary use depended on whether the player was using the control stick to look around or to move. In the former state, the D-pad would allow for weapon selection, otherwise it would be used to look around.

■■■■ The functionality of the A and B buttons were also dependent on the method of primary movement control. They could be used to crouch, fly or jump or to select weapons depending on what else you might be doing. It was tricky to learn, but effective for the time.

■■■■ The C buttons would be used for movement if the control stick was used to look around. Alternatively, they could be used to side-step, jump, fly, swim or crouch.

■■ Rather than set the action in a far-flung fictional world, *Duke Nukem 64* used Earth-based settings and brought the aliens here instead.



■■■■ The duo worked on high-end computers made by the American manufacturer Silicon Graphics. It was a clumsy way to develop the game but the Nintendo 64 was still new at this point. Mills stripped down everything that was PC specific and created a platform agnostic game that would draw everything in a 2D vector view. "Simon got the game code working on the PC in a top-down view using vectors to show the position of items and enemies," says Finney. Mills also wrote a tool that would convert the maps into a format that the Nintendo 64 could use.

The big difference was that the PC version used raycasting, which created a 3D perspective in a 2D map. "It draws everything in columns and pixels and goes across the screen deciding the shooting range and the environment and what it hit and drawing that texture," explains Mills. The N64 was polygon-based so Finney wrote a utility that turned the maps into triangles that could be rendered more normally.

Eventually, the two halves were ready to be pulled together and "late one night I integrated the game code with my code and you were then able to play most of the game on the N64," Finney says. It was at this point that the intricacies of the game could be worked upon. Eurocom had licence to use all of the graphics, sounds, maps and anything that was released in the *Plutonium PAK* expansion pack. But because the team had to adhere to Nintendo's guidelines "that gave us leeway to put a little of ourselves into the game," Finney tells us.

■■■■ The team soon started to grow. Artists were brought in to work on the graphics and the levels given a once-over by designers Bill Beacham and Kev Harvey. Beacham assumed the role of project manager along with Neil Baldwin, one of Eurocom's co-founders. Baldwin worked on the audio with Steve Duckworth. It was very much a hands-on affair with management working closely with the team and the whole thing overseen by Raymo who, although being based in the US, was effectively the liaison between GT Interactive and 3D Realms. He would make regular trips to the UK to ensure everything was on track.

It was a creative, if not indulgent, working environment. "The room Simon and I shared was pretty much

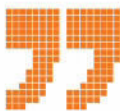


WHAT THEY SAID...



The sheer level of graphical diversity is impressive in itself but to spread the game over 28 levels and still include an exciting multiplayer mode is nothing short of brilliant

N64, 1997



soundproofed and we took advantage of it by playing loud music most of the day and night," Finney recalls with fondness. The team members were based in different rooms in the building but they would all bounce ideas around and inject some very English vibes into what was seen as a traditionally bombastic American game. Raymo would encourage the team to do this – "we could throw stuff in and almost no-one would say no," Mills says – but there was some resistance from 3D Realms at times.

"We always thought *Duke* was meant to be a spoof but I got the impression 3D Realms took it more seriously. We included jokes that sometimes 3D Realms didn't get. There was English humour in there too. But for us it wasn't just a port," says Mills, "it was an enhanced port. We would be taking stuff out but we were also putting stuff in."

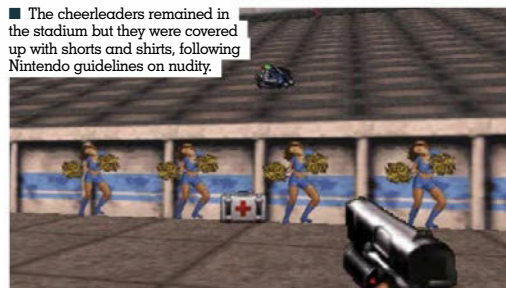
Most things remained such as the real-life locations that had so distinguished *Duke Nukem 3D* from the more fantastical *Doom*. The N64 version retained the puzzles of the PC version and the monsters never gained any better expressions than the original. It was possible to pick up vitamins that enhanced *Duke's* speed as well as armour, a jetpack and night vision goggles. The BUILD Engine had proved good at roughing out levels and so the designers could quickly prototype fresh ideas, though.

One of the most noticeable changes was the introduction of some new weapons. The Missile Launcher replaced the Devastator while the Freezethrower was dropped in favour of the Plasma Cannon. The other weapons were also redrawn with only the Laser Tripbomb escaping a rethink. "Rick claimed there had been some kind of internet poll and that the two least favourite weapons had been the Freezethrower and the Devastator," says Mills. "So he said replace those with something else which is why we came up with the new ones."

I GOT THE IMPRESSION 3D REALMS TOOK IT MORE SERIOUSLY

■ The game's artificial intelligence was also altered – "just so we could modify AI behaviour," Mills adds – and the use of polygons allowed for a different perspective. "The original game engine didn't use polygons and would have run very slowly on the N64 so the whole rendering engine was written from scratch by myself," says Finney. "The original *Duke 3D* maps could move and change shape in unusual ways meaning that I had to convert the map to polygons in realtime. Sectors could be created in odd shapes with holes, which was hard to triangulate correctly and quickly. I had to triangulate the floors and ceilings offline which meant we had to change some of the maps that would alter the floor plan."

■ The cheerleaders remained in the stadium but they were covered up with shorts and shirts, following Nintendo guidelines on nudity.



Finney also spent a while trying to get a 3D dynamic lighting system working and there was even a screenshot published in an American magazine showing it in full flow. It would have tracked missiles and lit up corridors with explosions but it wouldn't work at a decent frame rate and so it was dropped. At the same time, Mills had wanted every character to be built and animated as polygons but there wasn't any time. "The final boss was a proper polygonal character but the others were left as sprites," he rues.

The biggest alteration of all came with the approach the game made with its female characters, though. Known as "babes", these young, good-looking women were victims of the game's alien invasion and they appeared in various guises from breast-bearing strippers to those who were cocooned, trapped or festooned on posters. Controversially the babes trapped in the alien pods could be killed in *Duke Nukem 3D* but in the N64 version, they could be rescued instead and it became a fundamental part of the game.

"Just killing innocents like that was too much," says Mills. "I may be wrong but I think it was my idea to have the rescues in and have it as a stat at the end of the game so there was something to search for in each level. It was another thing to do in the game and something for the completest. We'd hide the women in strange places so they were an extra thing to find." At the same time, out went nudity along with bad language, drug references and anything religious (there was no chapel in the N64 version). It left a void, though, and while a lot of removed material was replaced with a pop culture reference, extra violence was used to bridge the gaps. "This wasn't a conscious effort, it just happened," explains Finney.

Perhaps it seems perverse that the game could not reference sex but was allowed to be even more violent yet that is what happened. The Red Light District became Gun Crazy and a gun shop replaced the strip club. There was a burger restaurant instead of an adult bookstore.

■ There may have been some risqué posters dotted around as the developers pushed the boundaries but there were no strippers or prostitutes.



QU'EST-CE QUE?

The Duke also made his way around the world

JON ST. JOHN was always the man behind the Duke's voice – except when it came to the French version of *Duke Nukem 64* when the dialogue was re-recorded by a French actor. "We thought he was really good but 3D Realms wasn't happy when they found out because they thought Duke was also Jon and that subtitles should have been used," says programmer Simon Mills. That would certainly have been the case for the Japanese version. "A Japanese publisher wanted to release the game, which was odd because we heard first-person shooters didn't do well in Japan," says Mills. "We removed all the blood and we had a Japanese company do the font but when it was all finished, the publisher said it didn't want it any more. It didn't appear."



WE WERE ALL BIG ACTION FILM FANS

"I even allowed the corpses to be shot and they would bleed and explode," laughs Mills. "I was proud of that. I think the idea for the strip club becoming a gun shop was Nick Dry's [one of the graphic artists]. He was of the idea that in America sex was bad but guns were good so we wanted to point that out. Nintendo was ok with violence so we replaced the nude women and had more exploding corpses."

In each case, lawyers would check the content – "it's the same on every game," Finney points out – and anything too close to the mark would be kicked back. "Things like this are iterative," Finney continues. "It gets kicked back and you change it and send it off again, if it's kicked again you change it some more. If you've had to change it so much that it's missed the point then you scrap it and try something else. None of this was a real problem [on *Duke Nukem 64*] since we weren't making a carbon copy of *Duke Nukem 3D*."



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

GoldenEye 007 > Half-Life > Call Of Duty



Although *Duke Nukem 64* made an impact on the N64, Rare's *GoldenEye 007* became the console's defining FPS.



The first *Call Of Duty* followed the trend for shooters based upon real-life wars, though the franchise has become more futuristic of late.



But what of Duke himself? Did the team think about tinkering with the main character in any way? "No, 3D Realms were rightfully quite strict about the look of Duke himself," Finney asserts. "Any render or graphic we did of Duke went through several checks by 3D Realms before it was signed off. Again, it wasn't a problem, it was their IP and they wanted it to look perfect." In fact, when it came to a question of deciding whether to go with the Duke's voice or have in-game music instead since a lack of space meant it had to be on or the other, the answer was unanimous.

"We had to go with Duke's voice," says Mills. "It's one of those things about Duke. He's talking and always quipping; he always has a line and that's a unique feature of him. No other games did it and while it's become a cliché since then to have characters say something, Duke virtually invented that. GT Interactive felt the voice was more important than the music."

Not that the team could use the original soundtrack. The cussing had to be stripped away and it meant a whole new script and another trip to the recording studio for voice actor Jon St. John. His voice was slightly deeper for the Nintendo 64 version – "maybe different recording sessions sees him do things slightly differently," offers Mills – and there were some lines that 3D Realms queried. "We'd tell them which movie it was quoting and then they'd be okay with it." Finney adds: "We were all big action film fans and you can see that by the references in the game. The artists and designers liked to put in little easter eggs from their favourite films or TV shows. My personal favourite was the U.S.S. Monkfish a reference to a sketch in *The Fast Show*."

For those who played the game on the N64, there was another difference when compared with the PC version. It wasn't possible to save the game mid-level. The PC game would save the entire state of the map and that resulted in a huge file, which would never have fitted on to a N64 memory card. "We had to drop any thoughts of a mid-level stage and we got the designers to look for things like instant death – the moments where you'd pull a switch and something would kill you," says Mills. "Having those kinds of things in the game would have frustrated players."

As development continued, it became apparent that the Nintendo 64 would be spawning some FPS rivals to *Duke Nukem 64*, namely *Turok* and *GoldenEye 007*. The team was influenced by *Turok* in particular and it led to them adding 3D explosions and the shockwaves. *GoldenEye* was seen as stealthier and more serious. "But yes, we did play the rival games," says Mills. "We'd look to see if they were doing anything interesting or anything worth stealing."

In order to explain the *Duke Nukem* story to newcomers on the N64, one of the artists drew up a storyboard of the



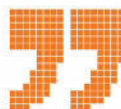
■ The alien on the toilet remained in the game but fail to shoot and he'll soon come after you – without washing his hands. At least there was a medikit handy.

WHAT THEY SAID...



This game is incredible. The graphics in the N64 version are ace, and the variety in each stage will keep you going for months

Nintendo magazine, 1997



tale so far and Mills added some simple effects on them so that they could be expanded and scrolled with sound. There was an idea to have a *Duke Nukem* arcade machine in the game that would play the first two games but it wasn't viable given the available resources.

Even so, there was room for a four-player death match and a co-op mode. "Four-player death match was a thing because Nintendo was pushing four player," says Mills. "They had the four joystick ports and if you were doing a N64 game it was assumed you had to have four players. We kind of knew we'd do the split screen too. The co-op mode was because the original PC version supported it so we thought we'd give it a go. We went with two-player in the end because four-player had a bad frame rate. You can actually use a cheat code to get four player working so it's kind of functional but we decided the frame rate wasn't good enough for it to be in the final version."

Finney was pleased to have multiplayer in the game. "We knew we were up against some big games at the time of our release so we had to support multiplayer," he says. "We were also all quite fond of dinner time multiplayer games so it seemed logical to have this in *Duke Nukem 64*." The team was also up against a punishing schedule. "As always the deadline was tight, we stayed late quite a few nights of the week and slept under desks when necessary," Finney adds.

In fact, things went to the wire. "Three hours from the final deadline, we realised that we had missed something important with the cheat menu," explains Finney. "Simon set about fixing the code when the power failed to the whole building. At that time, Eurocom didn't have a backup generator and all we could do was sit outside on the grass bank and look nervously at each other. Power was restored an hour later and Simon completed the task in time."

There was a sigh of relief but nothing in comparison to how the team felt when the game shipped and the reviews came in. All of the effort was rewarded with great review scores and even though critics instantly noticed that it had been censored, this new game was widely seen as having given the game a fresh lease of life. It was the blood-soaked treat Nintendo 64 gamers had been hoping for.



■ A lower-res four-player multiplayer deathmatch was also included in the game, which could be played to a time limit or a certain number of kills.

ENTERPRISING YOUNGSTERS

“■■■ The government had an enterprise scheme paying £40 a week for a year to set up a company as long as we had £1,000 each. But we had to be signed on for a minimum of 13 weeks. After *Twister* we did just that, but also took on another game that paid us exactly £2,000 but was never released. We signed on, got the cash, signed off and applied. The money was enough for bus fares, crisps and Cornish pasties.

Jon on how **Sensible Software** was formed





INTERVIEW

GETTING SENSIBLE WITH JON HARE

Jon Hare has not only been designing and programming games for 30 years, he's produced graphics and music, owned his own companies and found time to lecture students

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Wizball (1987)
Designer



Cannon Fodder (1993)
Musician



Sensible World of Soccer (1994)
Graphic artist



You've been creating games since you were a teenager, but when did you become interested in gaming?

It was after I met Chris Yates. I was 15 years old and going to a Rush gig in London with a friend called Paul Gibson and on the way back on the train, we saw two other guys from school. My friend knew one of them and the other was Chris who I'd seen around school but never spoken to. We became friends, but we'd mostly spend time chatting about being in a band. We'd sit in our maths class drawing logos. We wrote songs together and played loads of music.

Did you dabble in any programming at this stage?

No, Chris was more into technology than me and he studied computing at college. I studied theatre, maths and English and then found maths too hard so changed to drama. Chris would get computers on month-free trials from the Kay's catalogue, learn to program on them and send them back before ordering another. I was going around to his house loads to play music and he showed me the things he was doing. We still wanted to pursue careers in music though.

What changed?

The need for money. We got various small jobs but Chris started working for a local company

called LT Software and he was asked to work on a game called *Sodov The Sorcerer* on the Spectrum. He was struggling with the art so I did it for him. The guys in the company liked it and offered me a job as well, so I kind of fell into games. I worked on games like *Skyfox* and an earlier version of *International Karate* that was never actually released.

Why did you set up Sensible Software?

We'd been commissioned to write *Twister: Mother Of Charlotte* for System 3, which we did

WE WERE 19-YEARS-OLD AND WENT HOME SINGING, 'WE'RE IN THE MONEY'

in about two or three months and we discovered we were getting a 15 per cent cut while LT Software was getting 85 per cent. We thought we'd be better going it alone.

Where were you working?

We worked from a spare room in Chris' house. His dad was a radar engineer and worked away a lot in the Middle East so we'd have the house to ourselves. We got into the habit of working late. Our first game was *Parallax* on the Commodore 64. We contacted Ocean and

got a train up to Manchester. They looked at it and said it looks good and [owner] Jon Woods offered us a contract – £5,000 and a 15 per cent royalty. We were 19 years old and went home singing, “we’re in the money”, smoking cigars.

It was quite a prolific time for you, wasn't it?

We did *Galaxibirds* for BT and that's where I met my wife. We did *Wizball* next for Ocean and got an £8,000 advance. Chris wrote a utility to make lots of games but we realised the games were not that great so we just sold the tool instead. That was the Shoot-Em-Up Construction Kit: our first number one. We were also meeting lots of people like Gary Bracey and Martin Galway at Ocean. Martin came on board at Sensible for 18 months.

You made *Oh No!* and then *Microprose Soccer*. Were you excited to be making a football game, given you're a huge football fan?

I'd grown up playing *Subbuteo* with my dad and both Chris and I are big football fans so it was good to make a soccer game. There were names like *Emlyn Hughes* and *Match Day* but we thought we could do better. We were influenced by an arcade game called *Tehkan World Cup*. In fact a lot of games were influenced by the arcades. We wanted to call our game *Sensible Soccer* but the company offered £30,000 and wanted their own name on it.

Was music still a major part of your lives?

Chris and I killed the band in 1990 because it was hard to run both. Musically, I transitioned to work with Richard Joseph. He wrote the music and sound for *Mega Lo Mania*, one of the first to have lots of speech. But it was a strange time. Mirrorsoft's Robert Maxwell had jumped off his boat and lots of people lost money and pensions. We lost £75,000 and we'd just signed



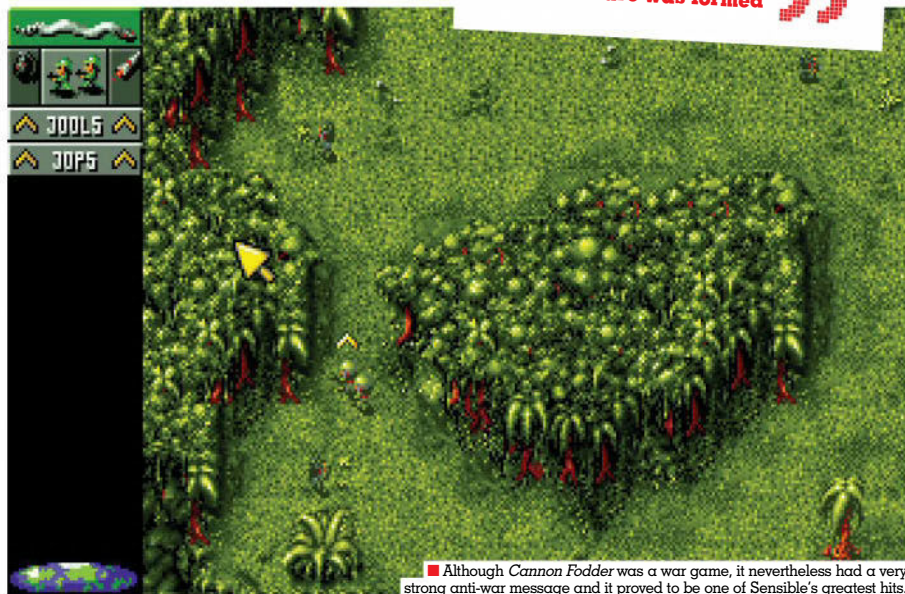
■ Jon Hare gets in some training with boxer Audley Harrison during the development of *Mike Tyson Heavyweight Boxing*.

CODEMASTERS BUYS SENSIBLE



“ We'd been going for 13 years and were down to eight staff. We asked Codemasters if they would buy us and they agreed, but it was hard to get hold of David Darling [Codemasters' former boss]. My wife and I went to Rome and we were in a restaurant. I looked over, saw a pair of women's legs and then saw a man: David Darling. Incredible. I went over, got chatting and became friendly. The next day we had a drink and the deal was done very quickly.

Jon on how Sensible Software was formed



■ Although *Cannon Fodder* was a war game, it nevertheless had a very strong anti-war message and it proved to be one of Sensible's greatest hits.

up *Mega Lo Mania 2*, *Cannon Fodder* and *Sensible Soccer* to them. We got *Sensible Soccer* and *Cannon Fodder* back, though. We went to the bank manager and all he saw were floppy disks worth 25p and we were like, no these are going to be really good. *Sensible* went to Renegade and *Cannon Fodder* to Virgin.

Sensible Soccer was the game that really made your name, wasn't it?

It was a massive hit in 1992. We could have signed it with Virgin but they wanted to call it *Virgin Soccer* so this time we stuck to our guns. Richard wrote the music for the second *Sensible Soccer* in September or October of that year and turned the *Cannon Fodder* tune and baseline I recorded into something amazing. We became very close friends and when he died I felt I had lost a limb.

Captain Sensible is listed as producing the original soundtrack on *Sensible Soccer: European Champions 92/93 Edition*. How did that come about?

Captain Sensible from The Damned contacted us before *Sensible Soccer* was due out and he said, you're called Sensible and I am too, so he wrote a tune and I wrote a contract that he never signed but we thought, 'Well, he's a punk, so never mind'. We actually got sued by his record company for including his song in the game. They said they wanted 10 per cent of retail, which was more than we were getting. We paid them off £10,000.

An amazing run followed, didn't it?

We worked on *Sensible*, then *SWOS* and *Cannon Fodder 2* – all number ones. Virgin and Renegade – now owned by Warner – wanted to own us completely but we wanted to separate the games between them. We chose Warner but the industry was transitioning to 3D and we couldn't sign 2D games. We also bit off more than we could chew and took on too much at once. We underestimated the amount of quality programming, management and art we needed for 3D. We had been lucky up to that point to have programmers like Chris Chapman and Jools Jameson but we ran out of luck with 3D.

In what sense?

The first three or four programmers were not up to the job and we chased our tails. The quality of our output diminished. We had taken £2 million but we didn't have a game at that time and we were going to bed having palpitations that they'd want it back because we'd guaranteed the cash. It was a crisis and we were in a high stress position. Warner sold to GT Software and it didn't like *Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll*. Richard and I had even written a 32-track concept album for that game but GT said call it quits. Chris and I were jumping up and down. We had 22 staff but had to lay a lot off.

Since then, you've worked for various companies, haven't you?

I went to Codemasters as a three-day-a-week consultant on *Cannon Fodder 3* and we had a great programming team – so good they were put on Codemasters' core engine team instead. I was then asked to work on the *Prince Naseem* boxing game in Fulham and worked with that team on *Cannon Fodder 3* but Codemasters closed the office and the team was canned. I was doing other stuff like consulting on *Micro Maniacs* and then took a three-month gap of nothing, watching the entire World Cup in 2002. I found the period from 1997 to 2005 hard to get original titles signed up.

You set up Tower Studios, though.

I did, in 2004 with John Phillips and Mike Montgomery, making mobile games for Nokias and stuff. But there wasn't a lot of money in it. I've worked as a lecturer at the University of Westminster on a module about professional practice in games, looking at how the industry works, the roles of artists and programmers, the importance of interviews. I worked with the Business and University Games Syndicate and I've mentored around the world. In the last year, I've been to Israel, Jordan, Croatia, Estonia, Denmark, Sweden, Germany and France. I do radio stuff like *OneLifeLeft* and I'm a voting member of Bafta. Every Christmas I watch around 65 films over two or three weeks. You need to be committed.

But football games are very much in your blood, aren't they?

Well, in 2006 I consulted with the guys at Monumental, working on *Football Superstars*. I've also worked on boxing games like *Showtime Boxing* for Nikitova, working in Kiev,



■ With the Sensible name having been used on *Sensible Soccer*, Sensible Software thought it was sensible to continue using the Sensible brand.

Ukraine, as director of development. I was in Turkey for six months to work with Sobee on *I Can Football*. And now I'm working on *Sociable Soccer*, which we announced last year.

How did *Sociable Soccer* come about?

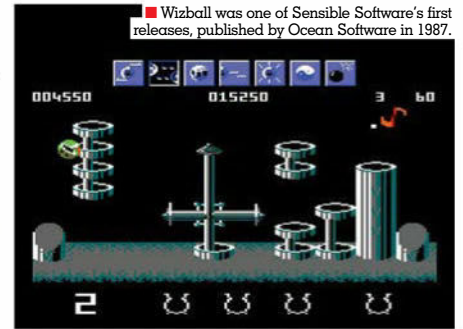
Ever since I worked on *I Can Football* I thought about doing another football game and merging online stuff into it. When I was in Finland, I was doing some karaoke, a bit of

IT WAS PRETTY HARD SEEING WESTWOOD FLAME OUT

Twist And Shout, and I bumped into these Finnish guys who had worked at Remedy and places like that. They showed me a nice hockey game and I said we'd talk. I didn't think much more of it until one of the guys showed me a football game he'd worked on. The conversation moved on last September, we sorted out contracts and started looking at how to finance it.

What's the game like?

Amazing. I show it to people all the time. It's already playing on PC and it's really good and



■ Wizball was one of Sensible Software's first releases, published by Ocean Software in 1987.

it's very much like *Sensi Plus* with different game modes, 30 competitions, 200 national teams, loads of club teams. The data is not licensed so it's Manchester Reds not Manchester United but the files can be edited, saved and shared and there's local multiplayer with up to 24 players in a league cup tournament. It's a classic *Sensible Soccer* structure.

With a career mode?

We haven't got a full career mode but we will do this in further releases. The new stuff is the online stuff. When you sign up, you are asked for your name, club and nationality. You make a 3D avatar and choose a fantasy team and then play against 49 other teams. Matches are fed into league tables and sorted by average points. The top ten are promoted each week and the bottom ten relegated.

The game was on Kickstarter but it was pulled. Why was that?

The choice was to start straight away or in January and we felt we had momentum we didn't want to lose. We launched with no pre-publicity and had 33,000 news articles in three weeks. But if you don't get 20 per cent of the cash in three days it won't happen. People also thought the price was high. It wasn't – you can't make a PS4 game for £300,000. Kickstarter isn't set up for high value stuff now and we thought, two weeks in, we should pull. We're talking with companies about the game now and Kickstarter may not be necessary.

When will *Sociable Soccer* be out?

It will be out towards the end of the year or maybe start of next year. *Pro-Evo* and *FIFA* have been up there for a long time and it's time to change that.



■ Jon Hare's new *Sociable Soccer* game looks very similar to *Sensi* and takes the developer back to his 90s roots, albeit it with a modern day, online twist.



■ The Sensible Offices in 1991 may not look too glamorous, but it was here that some of Jon Hare's company's finest offerings were produced.

GAME CHANGERS

DIABLO

Released: 31 December 1996 Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment Developer: Blizzard System: PC, Mac, PlayStation

Diablo is celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 2016. That makes for two decades of furious mouse clicks, loot collecting and sleepless nights; cheers Blizzard!



Who'd have thought Blizzard's take on a roguelike would go on to not only breathe new life into the RPG genre, but create a franchise that could stand the test of time?



DIABLO WAS A sensory-enveloping experience that began with the game box and came to a climactic close with a broken mouse and a bruised index finger. From that very first time you gazed upon the terrifying box art, staring deeply into the all-knowing eyes of Diablo, the Lord of Terror himself, you knew that you'd stumbled onto something wholly different.

When Blizzard set out to create its dungeon-crawling RPG back in 1996, there's no way the studio could have ever known the sort of beast it was unleashing on the PC scene; hell, all Blizzard thought it was doing was reinventing the roguelike. A reinvention it was, but of something much larger: the entire RPG genre itself. *Diablo* was fast and furious from the outset: imbuing the lightning pace and dreary atmosphere of *Doom* meticulously with the stat, loot and quest design of traditional roleplaying

games. The result was a stunning system shock; a wildly replayable and dangerously addictive experience that would keep gamers up until the witching hour cursing the Prime Evil's names in vain.

As one of three character classes – the warrior, the rogue and the sorcerer – you'd begin your ill-advised descent into hell. 16 floors of ferocious button-clicking; anyone or anything that approached you in the shadowy isometric dungeons quickly reduced to a splash of coins. It's terrifying; even today *Diablo* is unrelenting. Sure, it hasn't aged fantastically, and the graphical design is likely to incite a riot inside your migraine-inflicted mind, but it's all okay because the bones of the experience are so hopelessly addictive.

It helps that *Diablo's* grimy demeanour is essentially ageless, a design that's helped the franchise successfully

BEST BOSS

WANT TO GET THE BEST LOOT? THEN YOU NEED TO BEST THE BIGGEST ENEMIES IN THE GAME



THE WARLORD OF BLOOD

★ Did you make it to level 13? You get a chance to tackle The Warlord Of Blood. This encounter is actually watching over one of the most valuable quest items in the game.



DIABLO

★ To complete the game, you have to beat the big bad demon himself. Our advice: dodge the hellfire, get your clicks in and run like hell were at your heels, which it is.



THE SKELETON KING

★ The Skeleton King is a demanding scrap that gets harder the longer the fight persists; he soon starts raising allies out of the ground to overwhelm and defeat you.

thrive over the past 20 years. Videogames have come a long, long way in that time; we've seen and done some horrible things in horror games, but rarely have they contended with the morbid, deeply atmospheric hellscape that *Diablo* so quickly establishes and thrives upon. As you push deeper into the darkness, into the labyrinth of loot itself, you quickly understand that everything wants you dead, everything wants to see you crumple to the ground.

■ ■ ■ And so you click. Truth be told, it's likely impossible to actually calculate the influence *Diablo* has had on the modern-RPG design. Where RPGs were often casually demanding and comfortable experiences, *Diablo* sacrificed the playbook to the lords of evil and shoved the genre towards frantic action and real-time play. It didn't matter how good your armour level was, your hit percentage or even what loot you found out on your adventure; it was all for nothing if you couldn't click to keep up the pace. It's that core excellence that makes *Diablo* stand the test of time. So much of its original appeal was of course solidified in the release of *Diablo II* just four years later, but Blizzard absolutely nailed the gameplay loop. There's always a desire to topple more and more monsters, to delve deeper underground and to feed your

KEY FACTS

■ *Diablo* was originally going to be a more traditional take on the roguelike genre, with Blizzard once toying with the idea of turn-based movement and combat. You'd still have done plenty of clicking, it just would have been a lot slower.

■ The reason *Diablo* puts so much emphasis on The Warrior throughout your adventure? Because it was originally planned to be the only class in the game, with the Rogue and the Sorcerer added in towards the end of development. This also explains why the game features a critical lack of character back story.

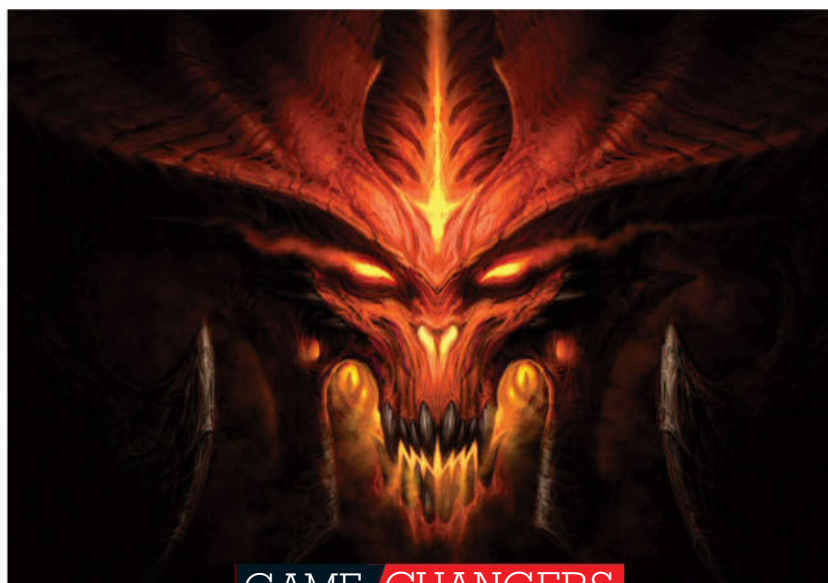
gluttonous desire to progress with even more powerful items under your belt.

Despite its influence on the action-RPG genre, *Diablo* was still resolutely a roguelike at heart. It proudly shouted about its heritage with its randomly generated dungeons, items and enemies. There's nothing quite like the grind in *Diablo*, the way Blizzard not only managed to actively make the game chip away at your sanity, but made sure that you enjoyed the surmounting torment too. Perhaps we're all just broken gamers now; our minds warped by the grind, leaving us desperately wandering through life in search of the next coin drop and loot stash.

That's not to say that *Diablo* was perfect, of course. While it displayed excellence in mechanics, the narrative was overwrought with exhausting dramatics. While era-appropriate, the voice acting would have a tendency to bleed the ears upon replays and then there's that ending – you either loved the monstrously depressing way that *Diablo* closed or felt cheated by the Warrior and his sacrifice; either way it's a closing moment players have argued about for two decades. That's kind of what solidifies it as a modern classic though. *Diablo* is a game that still spurs conversation, not to mention has fans chomping at the bit for the re-release treatment from Blizzard.

Blizzard might have refined and enhanced many aspects of the *Diablo* experience in the intervening years, but something has to be said for the original's atmosphere and feel. There's nothing else like it, *Diablo* is a truly diabolical gaming experience that revels in straining your eyes, sucking your life as the time vampire we all know it to be. That core experience is still totally, overwhelmingly addictive – the graphics may age but its mechanics have not. *Diablo* is you versus the world and, more often than not, the world wins. And so you click. You click until your fingers grow weary and your mouse is but a hollow shell of its former self; it's a time honoured form of self-punishment that changed gaming forever.

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE GRIND IN DIABLO, THE WAY BLIZZARD MANAGED TO MAKE THE GAME CHIP AWAY AT YOUR SANITY



GAME CHANGERS

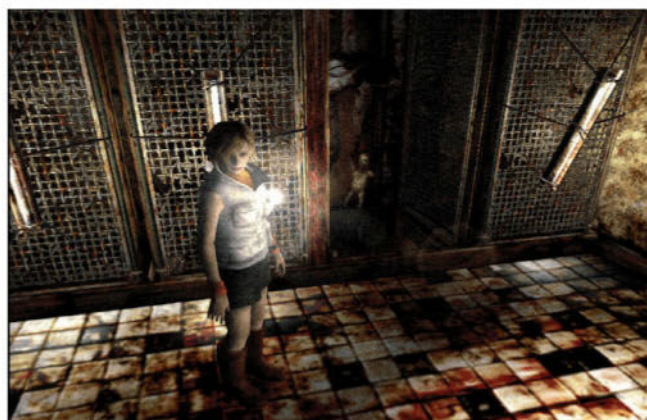
EIGHT GAMES WITH CURIOUS VISIONS OF HELL

TAKE A TRIP TO THE UNDERWORLD IN THESE GAMES
THAT REVEL IN MAKING YOUR NIGHTMARES A REALITY



SAINTS ROW: GAT OUT OF HELL

■ *Saint's Row* isn't known for its nuance or understated approach to storytelling, and *Gat Out of Hell* is a suitably stupid approach to the biggest questions in life. Like, what happens to you in hell? If the Saints got it right, you'll be taking an Uzi to the overlords of the underworld and taking part in a little Disney-inspired sing-along... it's better if you don't question and just roll with it.



SILENT HILL

■ It might be metaphorical, but it's terrifying all the same. As the game world shifts into the otherworld, players are taken to a personal hell for the character; a supernatural horror realm where nightmares crawl out of the fog and into your life. There's a reason the *Silent Hill* series is known as one of the most terrifying gaming experiences out there, and that's mostly down to what occurs when hell bleeds into reality.



GOD OF WAR

■ The reward and risks of venturing into the underworld have a huge part in Greek mythology, which is brilliantly explored in *God Of War* as Kratos murders every single mythological figure he can get his hands on. *God Of War* has you literally clawing your way out of hell, though subsequent titles let you introduce Hades as an entirely new form of punishment.



EARTHWORM JIM

■ Damn you, Evil the Cat. It doesn't take long to make it to the fiery hellscape of Heck in *Earthworm Jim* – a planet caught in a faraway galaxy that's ruled by a demonic feline – though you'll likely spend a lot of time trying to traverse this tricky piece of game design perfection. Heck has all the hallmarks of hell... only it's run by a cat boss with nine frustrating lives.



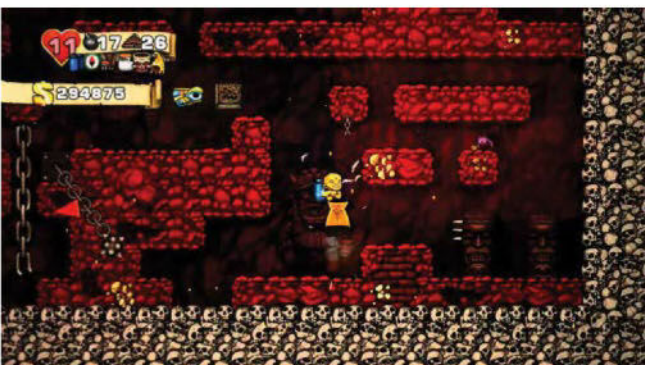
DOOM

■ Why is everybody so obsessed with going to Mars? According to the seminal FPS *Doom*, the red planet hides away a portal to the deepest depths of hell. Satanic armies swarm out a burning lake of fire demanding blood; you oblige of course, with a hearty shotgun blast to the face. id Software's vision of hell is as scary today as it was back in 1993.



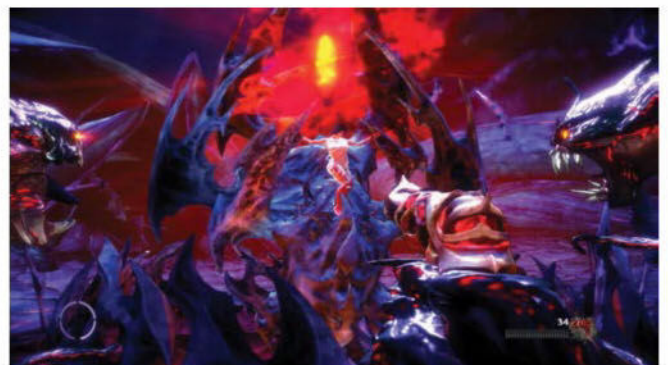
DANTE'S INFERNO

■ This revisionist take on a literary classic is a tour of the Nine Circles of Hell. *Visceral Games* was forced to make some colossal changes to the original prose; namely, you roam around decimating everything with unholy power. The Seven Deadly Sins reimagined as hideous enemies was a nice touch and that final battle with Lucifer is memorable to this day.



SPELUNKY

■ As if *Spelunky* wasn't tricky enough to begin with, adventurous travellers can also access hell by completing a series of seemingly random yet very precise events and puzzles. Once there, well you better get ready for punishing platforming sections and incredibly powerful boss fights. As with every interpretation of hell, you really need to weigh up the risk/reward factor before venturing in.



THE DARKNESS II

■ Into the heart of darkness you must go to rescue an innocent soul. *The Darkness II* gets a little dark – with Jackie committing suicide to reach the underworld – but its representation of hell is wonderfully bleak. You'll gnaw and tear your way through the minions of hell before being left with a crippling moral decision. What? No, we're not crying, you are.

THE V A U L T

GAMEVICE CONTROLLER FOR IPAD MINI

MANUFACTURER: **GAMEVICE** PRICE: **£79.95**

GAME CONTROLLERS FOR the iPad have been slowly on the up in recent months after Apple offered a new standard for integrating controller support into iOS games. Companies like SteelSeries have offered a range of options for standalone controllers for iPhones and iPads, but few have managed the same premium quality feel that is offered by the major consoles – until now. The Gamevice is the first iOS controller that we've used that feels genuinely as good as a dedicated gaming device.

The whole thing clips neatly onto your iPad Mini, connecting via the Lightning port to provide power to the controller. Once it's attached, it all feels quite similar to the Wii U's tablet controller, which certainly isn't a bad thing. The build quality is excellent, and the controller is moulded really nicely, making it comfortable even for long periods of gaming. The thumbsticks, especially, are fantastic



thanks to stiff and springy feedback as you play. Triggers sit on the top of the controller, too, and feel great to squeeze – it's a fantastic all-rounder.

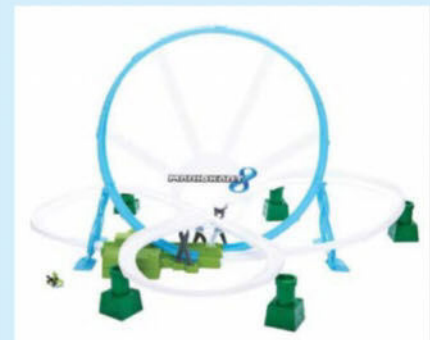
If there's a downside, it's the bulk of the controller – there's a lot to this device, making it less portable than some of the other iPad controllers you can buy. Still, for gaming on the go – especially for console classics like *GTA: Vice City* – this is the best example we've seen of how to upgrade your hardware.



PROTOSS PYLON USB CHARGER

■ When just getting power into your USB devices isn't enough, this Protoss Pylon gives you that extra boost of psionic energy. It packs in 2 USB ports, a micro-USB cable, and has a sweet blue glow.

www.thinkgeek.com



MARIO KART 8 DELUXE TRACK SET

■ In case racing through the twisting and turning tracks of *Mario Kart* just wasn't real enough for you, this miniature track set lets you live the race in real life – albeit at about 2% size.

www.tesco.com



BORDERLANDS GOLDEN LOOT CHEST

■ This awesome loot chest not only looks great, it comes packed full of exclusive stuff you can't get anywhere else, including shift codes for 20 legendary drop items, a bag, a hat and – obviously – a cool loot chest.

www.thinkgeek.com

GAMING CLOTHING



WEARABLE MEGA MAN HELMET

For cosplayers and fans alike, this replica *Mega Man* helmet is a must-own. Pair it with the *Mega Man* blaster that is also available and you're well on your way to one of the best costumes ever.

www.thinkgeek.com



LYLATIAN DEFENDERS

With a new *Star Fox* title on the horizon, now is the time to show your support for the team of animals that will save the Lylat system once more. This tee shows the crew at their most heroic.

www.teefury.com



IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM...

We would never normally condone the use of cheat codes when gaming – mostly because we always win – but when a sweater looks this good it's hard to argue with the sentiment.

www.threadless.com

UNCHARTED: THE NATHAN DRAKE COLLECTION



SOLD BY: **IAM8BIT** PRICE: **\$55.00**

THIS THREE-DISC AUDIO collection brings together the soundtracks from the first three of Nathan Drake's adventure on vinyl for the first time. The games' musical tracks, composed by Greg Edmonson of *Firefly* fame, represent huge adventures for the hero, and in this collection you'll be able to relive those quests through 44 magnificent tracks. The package is completed by some absolutely beautiful artwork by We Buy Your Kids, who have designed a sleeve for each disc, which represents the artifacts from each game, as well as some fantastic cover art.

store.iam8bit.com

ODDWORLD: NEW 'N' TASTY

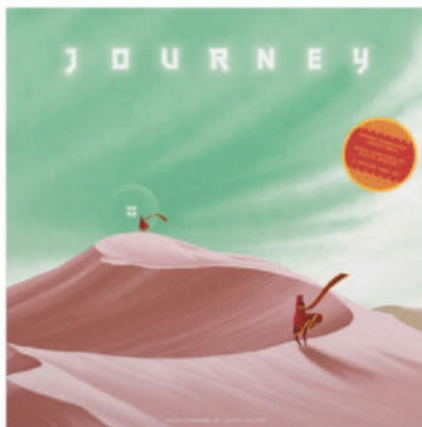
SOLD BY: **BLACK SCREEN RECORDS** PRICE: **£19.99**

AS A CELEBRATION of Abe's 18th birthday, German record label Black Screen Records has released this special edition of the *Oddworld: New 'N' Tasty* soundtrack on 180g vinyl. Available in standard black or a unique green design, the vinyl also has some other rather lovely treats inside – an exclusive, double-sided poster, and a free Steam code to download the complete game for Mac, Windows or Linux. And as if that weren't enough, the codes will let you download the soundtrack as an MP3, so you can listen to its thumping weirdness out and about.

www.oddworld.com/vinyl



JOURNEY



SOLD BY: **IAM8BIT** PRICE: **\$35.00**

JOURNEY'S SOUNDTRACK, COMPOSED by Austin Wintory, was the first videogame soundtrack to be nominated for the Grammy award. If that isn't reason enough to pick up this stunning set, then perhaps the artwork on offer will convince you; it features two picture discs, with artwork spanning the entirety of the surface. The art on show, created by Mark Englert, not only looks incredible, but links back to the game – the embroidery on the Traveler's scarf becomes increasingly more complex as you progress from side A to side D – just like each time you beat the game.

www.iam8bit.com

THE ART OF MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST

PUBLISHER: **DARK HORSE**

SAY WHAT YOU like about the gameplay, story or combat of *Mirror's Edge*, we won't hear a word against the art design of DICE's ambitious parkour experience. Its clean lines, sharp colours and futuristic architecture was a breath of fresh air among the drab greys and browns of the early part of the last generation.

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst is picking up exactly where the original game left off in this department, with a similar devotion to a clean artistic direction that just barely covers up the seething, dark and murky underbelly of political corruption and totalitarianism this world has succumbed to.

This collection is the ideal companion through the new game for anyone who at least appreciated *Mirror's Edge* on an artistic level.

Catalyst is a rebooting of the story, but the world is as extraordinary to look at as it ever was before. Now with the full power of new generation to build upon and a stronger engine as its spine, the art team has gone a little wild with its concepts, which you can enjoy in fantastic detail thanks to the oversized format of this expertly-printed hardcover book.

With detailed commentary from the design team to walk you through

the various enhancements and changes made to the game, you can see the gradual process of finding a new look for Faith, how the city was gradually pieced together and how through a more expressionist style some of the kinetic quality of the game was captured even in the concept stage. Like most Dark Horse art collections, this is one any fan should be keen to have when the book is launched later this year. Keep an eye out.



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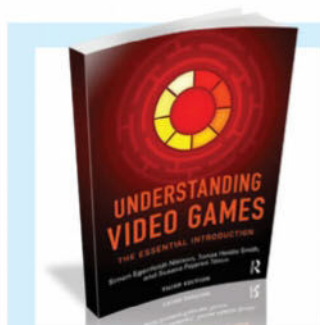
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